

Leon Modena's Autobiography

Prof. Mark R. Cohen

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Leon Modena (1571–1648) was one of the most enigmatic and captivating figures of the Venetian ghetto in the Age of the Baroque. Rabbi, preacher, translator, and teacher, seller of amulets, matchmaker, musician, printers' proofreader, commercial broker, and gambler—he broke the mold for Jews in that period. He was the friend of Christian intellectuals and public figures, and the author of an extraordinary range of books from rabbinic opinions to a dialogue both praising and condemning gambling.

Modena descended from French Ashkenazic Jews, probably victims of one of the expulsions from France in the 14th century. As moneylenders, they had settled in northern Italy, whose city-states were then just opening up their doors to Jewish creditors. Leon (his Hebrew name, Judah Aryeh, corresponds to the Italian, for Aryeh means "lion" and the lion is the symbol of the tribe of Judah) was born in 1571. He was a precocious child and student (at least, to hear him tell it in his autobiography). Like others of his breed, he studied both Jewish and secular subjects, the latter including poetry, voice, dancing, and Latin.

Though initially prosperous, his family experienced much financial hardship when Leon was growing up. In his own adult life, Leon also suffered from lack of financial success. He yearned to become a professional rabbi, even though in Venice at that time rabbis were not salaried. Rather, they were paid per rabbinic service, mainly responsa (legal opinions based on Jewish law). But even his rabbinical ordination did not come until he was nearly forty. Before then, and even after, and despite his many intellectual gifts, he often had to resort to tutoring children, something he did not enjoy. He earned also from other jobs outside the rabbinate, for instance, singing as a cantor, composing flowery Hebrew letters for people, drawing up contracts, serving as secretary for Jewish confraternities, and more. Stricken with anxieties, financial and other, he often gambled away what he accumulated.

He recorded the stresses of his personal and family life and also some of his personal triumphs in a Hebrew manuscript that he entitled *Hayye Yehudah* (The Life of Judah). This is one of the first Jewish autobiographies, discounting Josephus's *Life*, which that ancient author wrote in Greek and for a Roman audience. *Hayye Yehudah* was meant to be kept in the family, and also for his students to read—not, unlike most of his writings, to be published. The text bears similarities to but also telling differences from contemporary Christian autobiography, as Natalie Zemon Davis has shown

in an important comparative essay. It paints a vivid picture of a family, including its women, embedded in the bustling Jewish (and Italian) society of the seventeenth century.

Hayye Yehudah reveals much about the religious atmosphere in Modena's still premodern Jewish society. Everywhere in the book the presence of God is to be felt. He is thanked and praised. His blessings are invoked. His mercy is sought. And when the writer suffers, he states, "I do not know why God continues to treat me so roughly."

By Modena's time, the Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, esoteric in earlier centuries, had permeated Italian-Jewish religiosity. Modena knew many kabbalists and had studied its

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doctrines. Ultimately, he came to oppose it, and he wrote a treatise against it, appropriately titled *Ari nohem* (The Roaring Lion), a pun on his name. A staunch defender of Judaism against Christianity, he also composed a book against that religion, *Magen va-herav* (Shield and Sword). Like the autobiography, neither of these polemical works was published during the author's lifetime.

Nor was his defense of Judaism against a vituperous treatise challenging the validity of the Oral Law (the Talmud) and of rabbinic Judaism in general. He claimed to have come across it in 1622 and to have copied it in order to refute it. Modena's defense was called (punning again on his name) *Shaagat aryeh* (The Roar of the Lion), and the attack on the rabbis, *Kol sakhal* (Voice of a Fool). A recent book attempts to settle an old debate by attempting to prove that Modena was a closet critic of rabbinic Judaism and himself the author of *Kol sakhal*. Rabbinic responsa, commentaries, and polemical works reflect the ambiance of the religious elite. But the "Autobiography" is special in that it depicts religious life "on the ground." The Jewish life cycle of births, marriages, and above all confessions, elegies, burials, and mourning—the religious rites surrounding death—play a prominent role in the narrative. When, on the eve of their wedding, Modena's intended wife Esther is about to die, she summons a sage (*hakham*) to her bedside to make confession, a pious practice introduced to Ashkenazic Jewry in the Middle Ages. Life in the synagogue dominated Jewish existence in the ghetto. There were several synagogues in Modena's Venice, and some of them can still be visited by tourists today. Leon was an outstanding preacher. As was customary, he preached in Italian (when he published his sermons, however, he used Hebrew). Thus, non-Jews could attend and understand, and his renown as an orator attracted Christians to the ghetto to hear him. His reputation among Christian intellectuals abroad was based, in part, on his rhetorical skill on the synagogue pulpit. Among Jews, Leon was also a much-sought-after teacher for what we would call adult education, which, like services and sermons, formed part of the robust synagogue life of the ghetto.

In the 17th century, much organized religious life took place outside the synagogue, especially in Jewish confraternities (Heb. *hevrot*), which imitated the Christian model. Modena supplemented his income by preaching and teaching for the Ashkenazic Torah Study Society. He even compiled a confessional for the burial confraternity known as the *Gemilut Hasadim* Society (Society for Good Deeds). And he contributed a poem to a book for the *Shomerim la-Boker* Society, a confraternity influenced by Kabbalah whose members arose early in the morning to hold penitential vigils.

Alongside synagogue, confraternity, and expressions of faith in the supreme being, the autobiography provides a healthy dose of what we call “popular religion.” Modena’s life, like that of many of his Jewish contemporaries, attests to the characteristic *modus vivendi* in Judaism between certain types of popular magic or superstition and “official” rabbinic religion, the law-oriented religion of the Talmud and of the divinely ordained duties. Bibliomancy—seeking an omen by asking a child what biblical verse he had learned that day in school—figures as a favored device when trouble looms. The same Rabbi Leon Modena who preaches, teaches, and issues *responsa* also writes, teaches, and traffics in amulets and engages in dream divination. Astrology is a commonplace for him, as when he expresses the conviction that the heavens are battling against him and his family.

In one of the segments from his autobiography, Modena has his horoscope foretold “by four astrologers, two Jews and two Christians.” When he learns that the stars predict his death in just two years’ time (and this is confirmed by a palm reading), Modena regrets having requested the horoscope. As if to cancel it after the fact, he dons his cap as rabbi and exponent of “official” Judaism and acknowledges that engaging in the very act runs counter to the belief in God’s omnipotence. “So here I am today, pained on account of the past and anxious about the future. But God will do as He pleases.”

The autobiography also presents the author (and others) engaged (often along with Christians) in the popular pastime of alchemy. Modena’s uncle was attracted to alchemy. Leon himself (in one of the episodes selected) pursued the magical art. And his son Mordecai set up an alchemy laboratory in the ghetto, only to fall ill and die from exposure to the chemical fumes. This tragedy in Modena’s life—the loss of his firstborn son—repeated itself later on when another son, named Zebulun, was murdered by a gang of Jews to which he belonged, practically before Modena’s eyes. The autobiography provides glimpses of living under sufferance in Christian society, with its double-edged sword. Modena basked in the attention proffered upon him by Christians. Though locked at night, the ghetto was far from isolated from Christian society. Modena, like his fellow Jews, mingled with Christians during the day in other parts of Venice, and we have already noted that Christians were to be found mingling with Jews in the ghetto. Yet Jewish life was tenuous. Antisemitism did not dissolve in Jewish-Christian interfaith sociability. When individual Jews were suspected of wrongdoing, often the entire community was held responsible. In a long episode from the years 1636 to 1637, two Jews received stolen goods and hid them in the ghetto. During the investigation, arrest, and trial, a threat of general expulsion hung over the heads of all the Venetian Jews. The terror subsided only after the sentence was handed down, in which banishment was extended—unprecedentedly—to relatives of the guilty parties. One of Modena’s sons-in-law was among those so punished. Perhaps it is a precursor of a new age to come that Modena could hope to change Christian attitudes toward the Jews and thereby foster their integration into general society. He was fully aware of the centuries-old Christian belief in the inferiority of Judaism and misanthropy of the Jews. So he wrote a small book in Italian, but only in manuscript, describing Jewish rites and beliefs, the first such book

ever written by a Jew primarily for non-Jewish readers. It was an apologetic treatise in which Modena countered Christian stereotypes, depicted rabbinic Judaism as rational (he denied that Kabbalah was central in Jewish life), and portrayed Jews as non-superstitious and ethical. But, typical of the ghetto mentality with which he lived, Modena panicked when he learned that a Catholic friend had published the manuscript in Paris (in 1637). The author immediately pulled out an old copy and rushed it to the Venetian inquisitorial office, hoping to preempt penalization. After receiving the Paris edition, he published a revised one in Venice (in 1638), expurgating passages he believed Catholics would find objectionable. In similar vein, Jews during the emancipation era two centuries later would defend Judaism and the Jewish people against Christian revulsion in an attempt to win civil and social equality.



Modena's *History of Hebrew Rituals*, featuring a portrait of the author

[*Notes from Zamir, Spring 2003*](#)