

Italian Jews and the Left

[By Giorgio Israel](#)

Abstract: Upon Emancipation, Italian Jewry experienced increasing assimilation. After the trauma of Fascism and the Shoah, Italian Jews tilted mainly to the Left in the postwar period. The Six Day War and Communist hostility to Israel, the Italian Left's support of "Zionism is Racism," pro-Palestinianism, a growth in antisemitism due to Islamic propaganda, all gradually led to the detachment of Italian Jewry from the Left, the emergence of a Center-Right internal governance and support for the five-year Berlusconi rule. No dramatic effects have occurred, however, and the concerns of Italian Jewry today focus rather on the international situation and problems in Europe as a whole.

Italian Jewry has always represented a peculiar phenomenon within world Jewry. There is no doubt that this peculiarity is due to the presence of the Catholic Church. The historical condition of the Roman Jewish community, accurately described by Leon Poliakov in his *The History of Antisemitism*,^[1] provides an emblematic representation of this peculiarity. The Roman Jewish community is without doubt the only one in the world that has lived in the same place ever since the time of Julius Caesar and has enjoyed a high degree of ethnic continuity. It was able to perpetuate itself while maintaining very few contacts with the outside world. It was never removed or expelled, but maintained in a condition of segregation, humiliation and degradation in order to show the world a concrete example of the wretched state to which all those who denied the godliness of Jesus Christ would be reduced. As a consequence, the Roman Jewish community was characterized by unparalleled features of decline and cultural impoverishment.

The situation in the rest of Italy was quite different, and may be considered a melting pot of extremely fertile cultural interactions. Such interactions occurred with Spanish Judaism as early as the 11th century and again very intensely after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, which made Italy a place of transit or new residence for refugees. But significant interactions occurred also with Eastern Europe, above all through the cities of Trieste and Venice. Italy is a country where eminent Kabbalists, such as Abraham Abulafia or Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, lived and prospered, and where fertile relations existed between the Jewish Kabbalah and the Christian Cabala, as represented in particular by Pico della Mirandola. In this sense, Jewish thinking made a significant contribution to the development of Renaissance philosophy.^[2]

The result of this variety and multiplicity of experiences, the often temporary nature of the presences in the different cities (with the striking exception of Rome), has been a community that is as small as it is varied and heterogeneous. Even today, a century and a half after Italian unification, the differences have by no means been cancelled out and the

diversity among the Jewish communities in cities like Rome, Milan, Turin or Livorno is still quite apparent. For instance, smaller communities distrust the larger communities of Rome and Milan, especially the former, the overwhelming numerical size of which is perceived almost as a threat.

The establishment of a Napoleonic kingdom in Italy in the early nineteenth century, a kingdom which immediately set about knocking down the ghetto walls and introducing complete emancipation based on the French model, encouraged Italian Jews quickly and wholeheartedly to embrace the principles of democracy. Once again the case of Rome was different: the city had been returned to papal ownership for a period, and the gates of the ghetto were opened only in 1867 when the city was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy and the temporal power of the Church definitively ended. Nevertheless, the Napoleonic experience and the openmindedness of the Savoyard monarchy, together with the emergence of a concrete possibility of integration in the new national state, led Italian Jews in the direction of an increasing assimilation. This process resulted in a loosening of ties with Jewish religious and cultural roots. The Italian Jewish community was subjected to that process that Gershom Scholem described so accurately with reference to Jewish mysticism. When, towards the end of the 18th century, Western European Jews so resolutely chose the path of European culture, the religious sphere, and in particular its mystical component, was experienced as alien and disturbing, and so distant from enlightened rationalism that it was abandoned as rapidly as possible. "What remained had the appearance of a field of ruins, inaccessible and overgrown, dotted here and there with bizarre images of the sacred which offended rational thought."[\[3\]](#)

In my research work on the history of Italian science after the country was unified under the Savoyard monarchy, I have always been impressed by the fact that so many top-ranking Jewish Italian scientists--above all in the field of mathematics, physics and biology, but also in the humanities and philosophy--showed no trace of the slightest influence from or attachment to their own Jewish roots. In the writings and letters of great personalities such as Federigo Enriques, Vito Volterra (the eminent mathematician considered to be the greatest representative of Italian science, who was indeed nicknamed "Mr. Italian Science"), or Tullio Levi-Civita, not once is the word "Jewish" or "Judaism" used.[\[4\]](#) The complete and enthusiastic integration of Italian Judaism in the national society continued also under the Fascist regime, at least until such time as the latter's racial policies started to take on antisemitic overtones. The first antisemitic campaigns unleashed during the nineteen-thirties did not seem to be shared by Mussolini and a substantial part of Italian Jewry was lulled into believing that the groups behind them would be confined to the margins of Fascism. There is no doubt that a significant change took place in the Italian Jewish community with the spread of Zionism and as a result of the seesawing and ultimately bad relations between the Zionist leaders and Mussolini.

A large proportion of Italian Jews, especially those who were more deeply integrated or even had close ties with Fascism, vigorously rejected the Zionist idea and reaffirmed their attachment to the nation. Moreover, the supposed support shown to Zionism by large sections of Italian Jewry was used as a pretext by the antisemitic currents of Fascism to accuse the Jews of being a minority that betrayed the nation. This argument was ultimately used by Mussolini himself when he decided to launch an antisemitic racial campaign against the Jews. This turning point in the regime, which was reached in 1937 and culminated in the racial laws that began to be introduced in 1938, threw much of the Italian Jewish community into incredulous disarray. A striking symbol of this was the suicide of the publisher Formiggini, up to that time a convinced Fascist, who threw himself off the Ghirlandina Tower in Modena.

I have briefly outlined these facts as they mark a turning point in the awareness of the Italian Jewish community, an awareness which needs to be understood in order to appreciate the developments between the second half of the 20th century and the present time. A breakdown occurred in the feeling of complete acceptance of the idea of integration and assimilation, the community split up into Zionists and anti-Zionists,

Fascists and anti-Fascists, and as a final consequence of the racial laws strong anti-Fascist feelings began to spread through Italian Jewry. Those who did not fully accept the Zionist ideal, on migrating to Palestine, found a new basis for identification with the national society in the ideals of anti-Fascism and democracy. The recovery of a feeling of identity was accompanied by a certain reawakening of interest in Jewish religion and culture.

Politically speaking, Italian Jewry in the post World War II period tilted mainly towards the left wing. This was a consequence of the now complete split with the post-Fascist right wing and of the difficulties involved in identifying with the positions of a party like the Christian Democrats, at a time when Roman Catholic anti-Jewish feelings were still rife in the Church and among Catholics in general. The only remaining possible relationship was with the left-wing parties, among which those of moderate tendencies not under the thrall of the communist party represented only a small minority. There is no doubt that a substantial part of Italian Jewry, especially in the period 1945-1967, embraced the political stance of the communist and socialist parties, albeit with considerable misgivings deriving from the anti-Jewish policies pursued by the Soviet regime, particularly under Stalin. The question of the condition of the Jews in the Soviet Union was the cause of severe distress for Italian Jewry, although it did not stand in the way of its prevalent support for left-wing parties.

Things began to change more or less visibly from 1967 on.^[5] The extremely hostile attitude displayed by the communist left wing to Israel during the Six Day War was a cause of further consternation and extreme difficulty. Nevertheless, it did not produce any real split between Italian Jewry and the Left because the harsh criticism of Israel continued to be essentially political in nature, even on the communist side, and care was taken to maintain the distinction between Jews and Zionism. However, things changed quickly in the years that followed, in particular with the UN condemnation of Zionism as a "form of racism" in a motion that, as is widely known, was later withdrawn. The failure by the Left to distance itself from this motion, and indeed its substantial approval of it, marked the first appearance, in the mid nineteen-seventies, of an attitude that no longer involved criticism only of the policies of the State of Israel, but also of the nature of the state's founding ideology and paved the way to a criticism and even a harsh attack on the Jews and Judaism. Albeit in many cases without any subjective malicious intent, they were bundled together with old, openly antisemitic themes.

An important role was played in all this by the substantial lack of attention paid by the communist left wing for many decades to the issue of the extermination of the Jews during World War II and its total silence on the Fascist racial policies.^[6] In short, in the mid nineteen-seventies a problem with the Jews began to emerge on the Left, which became mixed up with the problem of Zionism and Israel. This was the cause of painful splits and led to much more tormented and difficult relations than had previously been the case. Nevertheless, it may be said without fear of contradiction that the support given by Italian Jewry to the ideals of anti-Fascism, which are so often equated with the ideals of the Left or even of communism, never faltered and remained a majority opinion. Even in the nineteen-nineties, the president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, Tullia Zevi, summed this situation up in a colorful expression: "Jews have left-wing chromosomes." But, albeit slowly, over a period of thirty years, relations between Italian Jewry and the Left gradually worsened and were completely reversed by the beginning of the present century. These left-leaning positions became those of a minority, as transpired at the recent congress of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities held in Rome in July 2006.

The various stages in this crisis are marked above all by the war in Lebanon in 1982 and by the more critical phases of the Intifada. During the 1982 war a highly traumatic event occurred: during a procession by the three main national trade unions, a coffin was laid in front of the Great Synagogue in Rome, precisely beneath the memorial to the Nazi concentration camp deportees. In spite of a gesture of reparation and reconciliation extended to the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, by the trade union leaders, this episode

left a very bitter taste. The spread of typically antisemitic stereotypes, such as the charge not only against Israel, but also against the Jews, of subjecting the Palestinians to the same persecutions as suffered by the Jews under the Nazis, has gained increasing currency over the past twenty-five years. This state of affairs is linked to the increasing dissemination of antisemitic propaganda from the Arab and Islamic political world, which has always enjoyed close relations with the Italian Left: the dissemination of the "Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," passed off as an authentic text, the insistence on the theme of ritual crimes and the profanation of the Host and like topics drawn from the most classic panoply of religious and non-religious antisemitism. Unfortunately, a large section of the Left, in particular the communist and post-communist component, has displayed only a weak capacity to filter out this propaganda and indeed, in some extreme cases, actually promoted it. However, it must be acknowledged that the high levels of hostility reached in other countries, France in particular, have never been equaled in Italy.

These developments led to a gradual detachment of large sections of Italian Jewry from its traditional special relationship with the Left. This detachment took on concrete form also in the shift of the largest Italian community, that of Rome, towards the Centre-Right that has taken place over the past five years at least. The first move was the shift in community governance towards the Centre-Right and then, in later elections, towards a Centre-Right/Centre-Left coalition government in any case dominated by the first component. Mention has already been made of the fact that, at the congress of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, held in Rome in July 2006, a centre-right-leaning majority emerged for the first time, although also in this case the way forward to a unitary and non conflicting governance was found.

These changes were no doubt favored by the change in foreign policy that occurred between 2001 and 2006 under the Berlusconi government, which had greater comprehension for Israel than was shown than by any other Italian government for decades. From the nineteen-seventies on, and in particular ever since the political convergence between the Christian Democrat party and the communists known as the "compromesso storico" ("historical compromise"), policy was constantly based on a strongly pro-Arab tendency that was highly critical of the policies of all the Israeli governments regardless of their political color. The recent coming to power of Romano Prodi's new Centre-Left government has closed the parenthesis opened in 2001, bringing foreign policy back into its traditional pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian trajectory. It is certain that this development again opened up a problem between the majority of Italian Jewry and the Left^[7] after the disappointment caused by the government adopting a highly critical stance vis-à-vis Israel, in spite of the repeated promises regarding an attitude of friendship and understanding.^[8]

Do Italian Jews think they have a future in their country? Despite the spread of prejudice transmitted via an "anti-Zionist" attitude and one of criticism of Israel, but which actually perpetuate the usual antisemitic stereotypes, the Italian situation is without doubt one of the most tranquil and favorable for Jews in Europe. The situation is much more difficult in Spain and France. It is no coincidence that the French Jewish community, the largest in Europe, is experiencing wholesale immigration to Israel. In both absolute and percentage terms the actual figures are relatively low. But they are nevertheless significant and betray a profound malaise when it is considered that the French community is firmly anchored in the national reality. Nothing of this kind happens in Italy, where migration towards Israel amounts to only a very small number of cases. Even the political swings described above have led to no dramatic changes of attitude. Despite the pro-Arab tendencies and an anti-Zionist/antisemitic contamination that lurks in a significant portion of the extreme Left and of the left-wing Catholics, the tendency remains toward a certain moderate stance in Italian politics, and a comparatively significant proportion of persons are highly understanding of Israel's arguments and vigilant against the danger of a resurgence of antisemitism, which is scattered across all the political parties. Greater concern is aroused by growing Islamic immigration, which leads to the existence of groups that are strongly hostile to Israel and the Jews, and lose no opportunity to voice these feelings in many

different ways. The most striking example is the presence of an organization, the Union of Islamic Communities in Italy (UCOII), part of the Islamic Consultative Body set up in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This organization issued a proclamation, published amid great publicity and at its own expense in the press in which it accused Israel and Zionism of being the new Nazism. The Union of Italian Jewish Communities reacted vigorously and a serious rift, which has not yet healed, was opened in the Islamic Consultative Body.

It may thus be concluded that, in spite of all the critical aspects described above and the specific problems regarding relations with some circles in the Left and the present government, it is not the actual situation in the country which raises the greatest concern among the Italian Jewish community. The most serious concerns arise out of the international situation caused by 9/11, out of the seriousness of the Middle East situation and above all out of the links that the dogmatism of Islamic integralism has established--in particular through the speeches and actions of the Iranian president, Ahmadinejad--between the Middle East question and the Jewish question, even to the extent of casting doubt on the truth of the Shoah.

These are processes with worldwide echoes that involve world Jewry in its entirety. The Italian Jewish community obviously feels totally involved in these processes. This feeling is aggravated by the lively concern felt in Europe at the spread throughout the continent of an attitude of passiveness and even appeasement towards Islamic integralism and by widespread, strong anti-American feelings. Very serious situations such as those occurring in the Netherlands and disturbing episodes such as that of the French intellectual Robert Redeker forced to go into hiding after writing an article criticizing Islam, arouse fears that such degenerative processes may be spreading over the entire continent, even invading hitherto peaceful areas such as Italy. This is a situation, I repeat, that involves the whole continent of Europe and that arouses feelings of concern and disquiet about future prospects also in the Italian Jewish community.

NOTES

[1] L. Poliakov, *The History of Antisemitism*, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

[2] G. Israel, *La Kabbalah*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005.

[3] G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism (Mysticism & Kabbalah)*, Schocken, 1996.

[4] On this topic see G. Israel, P. Nastasi, *Scienza e razza nell'Italia Fascista*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1998; G. Israel, "Science and the Jewish Question in the Twentieth Century: The Case of Italy and what it shows," *Aleph, Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, Vol. 4, 2004, pp. 191-261; G. Israel, "Italian Mathematics, Fascism and Racial Policy," in *Mathematics and Culture*, M. Emmer ed., Berlin-Heidelberg-New York, Springer-Verlag, 2004, pp. 21-48,

[5] On relations between Italian Jewry and the Left, see: G. Israel, *La questione ebraica oggi. I nostri conti con il razzismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002.

[6] See G. Israel, "'Davide discolpati!', ebrei umiliati dalla sinistra", *Il Foglio*, year XI, n. 17, p. II, January 20, 2006 (also on the web: <http://www.ilfoglio.it>, <http://gisrael.blogspot.com>).

[7] On the decline of the traditional leftist leadership of Italian Jewry, see the very interesting polemics between the monthly review of the Jewish community of Turin, "Ha Keillah" and the Chief Rabbi of the Community of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni: R. Di Segni, "Sull'elegia dell'ebraismo italiano," *Kolot-Voci*, section of the electronic journal *Morasha*, October 19, 2006 (<http://www.morasha.it>).

[8] On recent developments in Italian foreign policy see: G. Israel, "Israele e la trappola Unifil," *Il Foglio*, year XI, n. 215, p. II, September 12, 2006 (also on the web: <http://www.ilfoglio.it>, <http://gisrael.blogspot.com>).

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