

Review: Cohen's "Autobiography of Leon Modena"

Reviewed Work(s): The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's "Life of Judah" by Mark R. Cohen

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COHEN'S *AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LEON MODENA*\*

In 1622 Leon Modena, at the age of forty-one, prepared a list of his writings and of the publications of others in which his name had appeared, prefacing it with the candidly expressed thought that he found it "a source of great comfort that . . . despite death and these evil times, my name will never be blotted out among the Jews or in the world at large, as long as the earth remains" (*Autobiography*, pp. 122-123). His name has certainly maintained a prominent, if at times controversial,<sup>1</sup> presence in the Jewish world of letters since his death in Venice in 1648. With the publication in English of this elegantly translated and amply annotated edition of his autobiography, it is now more likely that his name will be well known and long remembered, as he confidently predicted, in the wider world as well.

Indeed, Modena's frequent bouts of anxiety, his repeatedly futile efforts to rid himself of his self-destructive obsession with gambling, his need (as the editor remarks) to update continuously his curriculum vitae, and his sometimes startling frankness about the strained relations within his family, all lend a certain contemporary flavor to this riveting autobiography. Perhaps it is for this reason that few decades have been as responsive to Leon Modena and his writings as the 1980s. A new edition of his letters was published (by Yacov Boksenboim) in 1984, a doctoral dissertation on his life and thought was submitted (by Howard Adelman) in 1985, in that same year there appeared a new Hebrew edition of his autobiography (by Daniel Carpi),<sup>2</sup> and three years later Princeton University Press has brought out the present impressive work of collaboration which will undoubtedly remain the standard scholarly edition for the foreseeable future. One hopes (and expects) that it will inspire similar projects in which specialists in Jewish and European history will bring their collective knowledge and insights to bear upon texts and topics of mutual interest.

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\* Mark R. Cohen, trans. and ed. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah*. Introductory essays by Mark R. Cohen and Theodore K. Rabb, Howard E. Adelman, and Natalie Zemon Davis, and historical notes by Howard E. Adelman and Benjamin C. I. Ravid. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. Pp. xxv + 308.

<sup>1</sup> Note, for example, Samuel David Luzzatto's charge that Modena hated the talmudic sages more than did the Karaites and that he was "more Reform than Geiger" (p. 39).

<sup>2</sup> *Letters of Rabbi Leon Modena*, ed. Yacov Boksenboim [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv, 1984); H. E. Adelman, "Success and Failure in Seventeenth Century Venice: The Life and Thought of Leon Modena, 1571-1648" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1985); *Hayye Yehudah*, ed. Daniel Carpi (Tel-Aviv, 1985).

Modena's *Life* is aptly described by Natalie Davis in her contribution to the present volume as "a combination of confession, of lament for his calamities, and of celebration of his achievements." In contrast to many Christian autobiographies, she notes, his life is told not as a development but as a repetition of motifs. Some of these motifs, however, are embedded within his highly allusive Hebrew style, and it is only with the aid of a proper scholarly apparatus that most readers today will be able to experience the various levels of this artfully woven text. Davis stresses another sort of embeddedness, however, that of the autobiographer within his family, which, in contrast to Burckhardt's view of Renaissance individualism, she sees as potentially assisting rather than detracting from the processes of self-exploration and self-revelation. This rootedness within the family, she suggests, can serve to sharpen the contrast between intimate life and public persona central to a fully developed sense of self.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that Modena, in presenting his life, records for posterity the births of all his children, even of a daughter who did not live long enough to be named (p. 98), but fails to mention his own rabbinic ordination, as Howard Adelman aptly observes (p. 27).

It is with his sons in particular that Modena's soul seems to have been most closely bound, especially with Mordecai, his eldest, whose relationship with him takes on elements of biblical myth which are refracted through his highly allusive style. In the opening paragraph, for example, Modena explains that he began writing his autobiography primarily in order to bequeath it to his late firstborn son, "the apple of my eye, the root of my heart, whose bright countenance was similar to mine, a man of wisdom. . . . All my thoughts were of him" (p. 75). An educated seventeenth century Jewish reader would have immediately recognized that Modena, in lamenting his own son, was also alluding to another man's son, who had been both beloved and lamented, and to another tragically close father and son relationship, the one between the patriarch Jacob and the apple of his eye, Joseph. The similarity between the "bright countenances" of the latter pair is noted in the Midrash and is canonized in Rashi's commentary on the Torah (Gen 37:3), and the Aramaic phrase which Modena used to render "a man of wisdom" is taken from the Targum's description of the young Joseph (*ibid.*).

Later in that same paragraph Modena alludes even more directly to the Joseph motif by quoting the words of Jacob: "I will go to my grave mourning for my son" (Gen 37:35). But the final allusion in Modena's introduction to the Jacob-Joseph relationship as prefiguring his own with Mordecai is perhaps the most artful: "From the moment I entered the world I had neither tranquility nor quiet nor rest, and then disquietude came upon me, namely disquietude over my son

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<sup>3</sup> N. Z. Davis, "Fame and Secrecy: Leon Modena's *Life* as an Early Modern Autobiography," pp. 50–53, 58–61. Cohen and Rabb also speak in their essay ("The Significance of Leon Modena's Autobiography for Early Modern Jewish and General European History") of the autobiography as one man's life "within his family" (*ibid.*, p. 3).

Mordecai of blessed memory” (p. 76). As the editor notes, these words are constructed on the basis of a verse in Job (3:21). The intertextuality of the passage, however, goes considerably further, for the same verse was imaginatively placed by the rabbis in the mouth of Jacob and was glossed as a catalogue of the tribulations which he suffered through members of his own family: “I had neither tranquility’—from Esau—‘nor quiet’—from Laban—‘nor rest’—through Dinah; ‘and then disquietude came upon me’—through Joseph.”<sup>4</sup>

It is clear, then, that Modena used the biblical motif of Jacob’s tragic relationship with Joseph as a means of representing, to himself as well as to others, his own profound sense of loss (and perhaps guilt) in the wake of his son Mordecai’s untimely death. This is conveyed, however, only partially through direct biblical quotation and more substantially through the use of rabbinic glosses upon the words of the Bible. Indeed, Modena himself expressed the opinion, in a series of notes on style which he once jotted down, that a reader should be addressed according to his level of learning—“If he is a master of Talmud, then with the sayings [of the rabbis].”<sup>5</sup>

It is safe to assume that Modena expected his students and descendants—the primary audience for whom, according to the introduction, his autobiography was written—to be conversant with the language and subtexts of rabbinic discourse. An annotated edition of that work would optimally strive, then, to provide the biblical and rabbinic sources alluded to by the author, at least in those places where the earlier text significantly shapes the meaning of the later one into which it was incorporated. Although the editor of the present volume has provided the biblical sources with admirable comprehensiveness, he has paid considerably less attention to the rabbinic stratum in Modena’s style.<sup>6</sup> Yet in some

<sup>4</sup> *GenR*, 84. See the Theodor-Albeck edition (Jerusalem, 1965<sup>2</sup>), p. 1003 and compare the English translation of H. Freedman in *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (London, 1939), 2:771. This rabbinic allusion was cited by Daniel Carpi in his notes to the Hebrew text (*Hayye Yehudah*, p. 32, n. 1) but was not incorporated by the editor of the present edition. On the other hand, the biblical source of the words “I will go to my grave mourning for my son” was not cited in Carpi’s edition but is provided in the present work. This verse was used also by Maimonides in speaking of his late brother David, as was noted by S. D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton, 1973), p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> *Letters of . . . Modena*, p. 344. These notes are cited by Mark Cohen in his preface to the *Autobiography* (p. xvii, n. 7).

<sup>6</sup> See also his comments, pp. xviii–xix. Among the missing rabbinic references note, for example, pp. 94 and 132, where Modena describes his father and later his son-in-law as exemplary husbands, both of whom honored their wives more than themselves. Lest his words be taken overly literally it would have been useful to point to bYeb 62b and bSanh 76b as well perhaps as to the words of Maimonides in his Code: “The sages have likewise ordained that a man should honor his wife more than his own self, and love her as himself (*hilkhot ’ishut*, 15.19). Similarly, when Modena at the age of seventy-six laments that since his birth “there has not

instances, as we have seen, both literary strands come together as part of a single textual strategy, and selective annotation can deny the modern reader access to the full impact of the Hebrew original. It is not only the literary scholar who has reason to investigate the textual strategies of the sources he is analyzing, but the historian as well, as scholars of the Crusade chronicles have shown for Jewish history, and as Natalie Davis has demonstrated in her own recent work on petitions for pardon in early modern France.<sup>7</sup>

The present volume is enriched by some ninety pages of “historical notes” to Modena’s autobiography, which include such bits of information as why Jews named Mordecai were often called Angelo in Italian, why the Venetian island, used for quarantine purposes, was called “Lazzaretto,” and what punishments were proposed by members of the Council of Ten in the 1636 case of a Jew accused of receiving stolen goods.<sup>8</sup> These will certainly be a goldmine for many scholars, and for some general readers as well. Yet more space could have been allotted to what might be called “literary notes,” which would seek not to provide additional information but rather to explain, and in some cases perhaps speculate more expansively upon, what is going on in the text, whether at surface level or below.

Modena could sometimes be quite cryptic, especially in the section entitled “Miseries of My Heart in Brief,” which, as Natalie Davis suggests in her essay, may be a “topical rethinking of his life” around 1645 (p. 64). Among the ghosts which returned to plague him was his recollection of his son “Mordecai of blessed memory with Raphael Spira, and I did not know a bit, and afterward, until his death, with the Morisco, may his name be blotted out” (p. 168). Davis’s suggestion that these words may allude to homoerotic activity between Mordecai and the two other men is passed over in silence by the authors of the historical notes, who point instead to a letter written by Modena to Raphael Spira, evidently in 1609, which may hold the key to the implicit guilt felt by the father concerning whatever it was that his son did with Raphael Spira. For Leon, we learn, was the unsuspecting go-between in the affair. In his letter to Spira he apologized for not

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been a day that has not been more accursed than the one before” (p. 162), some of the edge may be taken off his words by noting that he is paraphrasing the rabbinic sage Rava (bSot 49a, and compare mSot 9.12). Modena had used the same phrase in a letter written many years earlier (see *Letters of . . . Modena*, p. 164).

<sup>7</sup> I. G. Marcus, “From Politics to Martyrdom: Shifting Paradigms in the Hebrew Narratives of the 1096 Crusade Riots,” *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 40–51; N. Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> *Autobiography*, pp. 185, 242, 251. As a rare exception to their general meticulousness I would cite the identification of Isaac Gershon with Isaac ben Mordecai Gershon Treves (p. 213), which, although once accepted in scholarship, has since been disproven. See E. Horowitz, “R. Isaac ben Gershon Treves in Venice,” [Hebrew] *Qiryat Sefer* 59 (1984): 252–257, and I. Yudlov, “R. Isaac Gershon and R. Isaac Treves,” [Hebrew] *ibid.*, pp. 247–251.

being able to visit him, adding, "If you like, I can send you my half, that is my son Mordecai [then almost eighteen] who could serve you in teaching your sons as well as in your business."<sup>9</sup> If indeed a homosexual relationship did eventually develop between Spira and the young Mordecai, as Davis suggests, it would be quite understandable for Modena to make a point of stating for the record that he "did not know a bit."

In 1614 Mordecai, who was then twenty three and not yet married, was forced to leave Venice suddenly "as a result of the vexations of a certain wicked and sinful man" (p. 108). The authors of the historical notes observe quite rightly that "the unspecified antagonism must have been great," as the date given by Modena for his son's hasty departure corresponds with that of Yom Kippur (pp. 216–217)! They do not speculate, however, on the nature of these "vexations," but one wonders whether they may have occurred, like those unspecified actions in the "Miseries of My Heart" section, within a homoerotic context. Modena was clearly holding something back in both passages, and it may well have been the same thing—a frank admission of his son's homosexuality. He had described Mordecai, his eldest, as the apple of his eye and the root of his heart, comparing him explicitly to himself, and it would have been especially difficult to acknowledge openly such deviant behavior on the part of a son with whom he identified so closely.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to his other sons he made less of an effort to hide their indelicacies. Thus Zebulon's confession of sins before his death was reported by his father, but also recorded was the fact that his murder at the hands of fellow Jews in the Venetian ghetto had been motivated by jealousy over the favors of a (Jewish) prostitute (pp. 120–122). His older brother, Isaac, is described by his father as "behaving improperly" as a seventeen year old, on account of which he exiled him to Patras in Morea, which led to thirteen years of wandering in the Levant (p. 105). Here, too, the severity of the punishment raises questions about the nature of the improper behavior, which Modena in the Hebrew original describes as *ma'aseh na'arut*, and which Cohen translates as "childish escapades." There

<sup>9</sup> *Letters of . . . Modena*, pp. 147–148.

<sup>10</sup> Note also Leon's dream shortly before Mordecai's death in which his son reported to him that he had taken a house outside the ghetto. When the father asked where it was, Mordecai responded, "I do not want to tell you, for I do not want you to come to find me" (p. 112). Although the more overt meaning of the dream relates to the theme of death, there may be an allusion in it to illicit activities which require privacy and which the son sought to hide from his (knowing) father. The dream reported on the following page (p. 113), in which Mordecai asked to be shown his future wife and was shown a coffin covered in black, may be about death, but it may also be about heterosexuality. On the awareness of homosexuality among Italian Jews of the early seventeenth century note the comments of Leon's cousin, R. Aaron Berechiah of Modena in his *Ma'avar Yabboq* (Mantua, 1626), p. 40a.

may be another intertextual allusion here to the escapades of another seventeen year old, the biblical Joseph (upon whom, as we have seen, Modena was fond of drawing), who is described in Gen 37:2 as “being still a boy,” which the rabbis (and in their wake Rashi) glossed as meaning that he engaged in *ma’asey na’arut*. By this was intended self-prettification, possibly of a sexually provocative nature, such as painting the eyes, curling the hair, and walking with a mincing step.<sup>11</sup> Modena seems to suggest that his son Isaac was also beginning to become sexually attractive, and that this was getting him into trouble, although it is not clear precisely with whom. Cohen, in his notes, suggests the alternate reading of *ma’seh na’arot*, which he translates as “escapades with young girls,” but which might also be rendered, not unreasonably, as “girlish escapades,” suggesting a rather different sexual orientation.

Isaac, unlike either of his two brothers, did eventually marry, although this did not occur until he was over forty. It is not clear why Cohen and Rabb speak in their introductory essay of the “singularly early marriage age of both males and females” among the Jews of early modern Europe (p. 16). The evidence from Modena’s autobiography is certainly mixed. Zebulon, it is true, was murdered before he turned twenty one, but Mordecai, who also never married, did not become fatally ill until he was twenty-six, allowing ample time to find a wife (unless homosexual proclivities stood in his way). Although Leon himself married at an early age and his daughters even earlier, the average age at marriage among Italian Jewish males may have been quite high.<sup>12</sup> They certainly insisted upon high dowries before agreeing to step under the marriage canopy, which suggests that Zebulon Modena’s familiarity with prostitutes was not as unusual as some might think.

It is clear, as Cohen and Rabb indicate in their essay, that some of the newer approaches from other disciplines which have shifted both the nature and the goals of historical research need to be better incorporated into the study of early modern Jewish history (pp. 13, 17). These approaches could also have been more extensively incorporated in the notes to the present edition. Although the authors single out anthropology as one of the disciplines which has especially influenced recent historical research, little is done with some of the curious gestures and rituals which Modena mentions in passing in his *Autobiography*. That of hand-kissing, for example, is particularly interesting. Leon, in speaking of his learned grandfather Solomon Modena, makes a point of mentioning that he “once kissed

<sup>11</sup> *GenR*, chap. 84. Compare the English renditions of Freedman in his translation (p. 774) and L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. H. Szold (Philadelphia, 1946) 2:5.

<sup>12</sup> A recent estimate has placed the average age at marriage among Italian Jews between 1450–1550 as 24–25 for males and 20–21 for females. See A. Toaff, *Il vino e la carne: Una comunità ebraica nel Medioevo* (Bologna, 1989), p. 33, and the sources cited there, p. 48.

his hands in Ferrara, in the month he died" (p. 78). It would perhaps have been appropriate to point to the stylistic convention then observed of closing a letter with a symbolic kiss, the nature of which depended upon the relative status of the recipient. Thus Mordecai Modena once concluded a letter from Ferrara to an uncle in Venice with the words "and I kiss the hand of my master and the face of my brother Zebulon."<sup>13</sup> These kisses, as the autobiography suggests, were rooted in reality and not merely in rhetoric. Their social significance is further underscored by Leon's grandson Isaac in his autobiography, where he reports that as soon as his grandfather died he went to kiss the hand of Šimḥah (Simone) Luzzatto, chief rabbi of Venice, "as was incumbent upon him and necessary." This, to be sure, was no spontaneous gesture of affection, as there was no love lost between the two, but rather one of homage and respect, similar in some ways to kissing the foot of a new pope upon his accession.<sup>14</sup> It is possible, moreover, that the kiss which Leon received from his first fiancée upon her deathbed and which she herself described as "bold behavior" (p. 91) possessed a ritual element as well, namely the formal leave-taking of the dying from the living by means of a kiss.<sup>15</sup> The kiss he placed on his grandfather's hand shortly before the latter's death would then take on a double significance—formal leave-taking from the dying as well as a gesture of homage.

Cohen and Rabb mention "popular religion" as another of the areas in which material from Modena's autobiography meshes with the interests of current historiography. They point insightfully to "the comfortable relationship . . . between 'popular' and 'official' religion that his book reveals" in contrast to the "more differentiated relationship" apparent in the Christian world (pp. 7, 17). Yet this observation might also have been better incorporated into the annotation of the present volume. Among the instructions for his funeral that Modena left in his will of 1634 was, "Let them march around my grave according to the custom of the Levantines" (p. 178). This custom, which Modena preferred to call "Levantine," was also kabbalistic, and was intended to keep away from a man's coffin the

<sup>13</sup> *Letters of . . . Modena*, pp. 94. See also *ibid.*, p. 95 and *infra*.

<sup>14</sup> See Isaac min ha-Lewiyim, *Medabber Tahapukhot*, ed. Daniel Carpi (Tel-Aviv, 1985), pp. 71, 87. This information is recorded in the "manifesto" against Luzzatto which Isaac included in his autobiography (*ibid.*, pp. 70–71). On the importance of gesture in early modern Italy see now Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), especially pp. 155f., and on kissing the foot of the pope see also *ibid.*, pp. 172–173. On the kissing of hands and feet, whether actual or figurative, as a gesture of respect among earlier Mediterranean Jews see also S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 3:18, 240.

<sup>15</sup> Compare the behavior of R. Judah Minz before his death as described by Elijah Capsali in his *Seder Eliyahu Zuṭa* (Jerusalem, 1977), 2:254 and of R. Samuel Aboab as described in Neppi and Ghirondi, *Toledot Gedole Yisrael* (Trieste, 1853), p. 368.



demons created by his “lost seed.”<sup>16</sup> The authors of the notes find it “interesting” that an Italian rabbi would choose to be buried according to Levantine custom (p. 272), but they fail to note the greater irony of an anti-kabbalist choosing an anti-demonic rite for his own funeral. It is possible that by the early seventeenth century some kabbalistic practices had become so much a part of popular religious culture that their mystical nexus had been obscured. The question, in any case, deserves more serious treatment.

The ghetto, of course, is an aspect of Italian Jewish life in the seventeenth century that no study of the period can ignore, and it does indeed crop up frequently in the various contributions to the present volume.<sup>17</sup> Cohen and Rabb correctly and repeatedly stress the limited impact of the ghetto, so that despite their physical segregation, there persisted among Italian Jews “a rich cultural life that exhibited tastes and interests acquired during the Renaissance.” On the social level as well, they assert, Christians and Jews continued to have frequent contact, so that despite their residential separation “Jews were very much a part of the world at large, interacting with their environment on all levels, from the highest to the lowest (as the seamier episodes in Modena’s autobiography so graphically show”); pp. 5, 12). This view, which may seem revisionist to some, was in its essence enthusiastically put forward by Cecil Roth in the studies which he published since the early decades of our century. The ghetto, he wrote “was insufficient to interrupt entirely the friendly relations between Jews and Christians” who, as he put it, “drank together, experimented together, gambled together, traveled together, sometimes even flirted together.”<sup>18</sup>

These words might serve as a description of the Jewish experience on many an American college campus today, and indeed there is room for speculation as to whether the Jewish historical writing produced on such campuses draws its view of the past, even in some small measure, from the experience of the present. The same holds true for the difficult and always debatable decision as to which aspects of the Jewish past most deserve the historian’s attention. Cohen and Rabb assert in their essay that the experience of the Jews deserves to be incorporated into the

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<sup>16</sup> See Gershon Scholem, “Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists” in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim (New York, 1965), pp. 154–156.

<sup>17</sup> See especially Benjamin Ravid’s excursus on “The Venetian Ghetto in Historical Perspective,” pp. 279–283.

<sup>18</sup> Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in Italy* (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 393. See also *ibid.*, pp. 320, 391. Some ten works by Roth are mentioned in the historical notes to the present edition, and it might therefore have been appropriate to devote some attention to the ways in which his writings have continued to shape the way we view Modena’s world. Although his early monograph on Venice, as the authors note, is “dated and must be used with great caution” (*Autobiography*, p. 183), his *History of the Jews in Italy* has aged somewhat better. It does not, however, make their list of recommended reading “for a general introduction to the Jews in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy” (*ibid.*, p. 184).

broader picture of early modern European history “even though they often exhibited distinctive behavior and specifically Jewish modes of response to the forces acting upon them” (p. 12). Some might rather assert that it is precisely their distinctive behavior and modes of response that make the Jews most interesting to the historian of early modern Europe. How one relates to “difference” can sometimes make all the difference.

Leon Modena himself had something to say about the problem of maintaining the necessary detachment when writing about the Jewish experience. In his introduction to the original Italian of his *Riti* (on the rites and customs of the Jews) he presented himself as writing while “forgetting I am a Jew, fancying myself a simple and neutral relater.” Modena may have convinced himself of this, but as Natalie Davis deftly observes (p. 67), his English translator of 1650 reversed the meaning of the sentence, whether intentionally or otherwise. Perhaps despite the self-fashioning then in fashion, he had trouble putting into the mouth of a Jew the words “forgetting I am a Jew,” finding such a leap of the imagination nothing short of inconceivable. What he put, rather, in Modena’s mouth were the words “I have kept myself exactly to the truth, *remembering* myself to be a Jew.” Readers of this fine volume may sometimes find themselves pondering some of the questions that the most stimulating work in Jewish history forces us to ask: Is the writer brought closer to the truth by forgetting his Jewishness or by remembering it? Is Jewish life of most interest to historians when it corresponds to wider patterns or when it departs from them? They may also ask whether the story of one man’s life is worth so much attention, but in this case the unanimous answer will undoubtedly be—yes!

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