Jedidiah ben Isaac Gabbai and the First Decade of Hebrew Printing in Livorno

Jedidiah ben Isaac Gabbai printed his first book, the midrashic work, Yalkut Shimoni, on the Torah, with the commentary Berit Avraham, in Livorno, Italy, in 1650. It is a large book, well done, and attractive. We might have expected, given the quality of this work, and the location of the print-shop, in the prosperous Sephardic community of Livorno, for the press to have had a long successful life. This was not the case, however; only a small number of books were printed and the press was only open for less than a decade.

The history of the press, the books printed by it, the persons employed there, and the community it was in, given the print shop’s short life span, interest us not so much because of its importance in the history of the Hebrew book, although that too, but because its books and authors provide us with an insight into Jewish intellectual activity and highlights for us many of the currents affecting Jewish life in the Mediterranean littoral at the midpoint of the seventeenth century.

Livorno is frequently described as an especially fortunate residence for the Jews. We hear, from a Brother Labant, that the Jews of Livorno are “free there...they are protected to the point where it is proverbial in Tuscany that it would be better to beat up the grand duke than a Jew.” Elsewhere it is referred to as “a mekom ha-zedek (a righteous place), for it knew neither restrictions nor persecutions since the first Marranos founded the community at the end of the sixteenth century.” While the Jewish condition in Livorno was certainly better than in many other locales, there was also a dark side, for as Brother Labant also observes, Jewish success “makes them all the more odious to everyone else.”

1 The original version of this article was published in Los Muestros, part I no. 33 (Brussels, 1998), pp. 40–41; part II no. 34 (1999), pp. 28–30.


The Jewish presence in Livorno, in northwest Tuscany, Italy, dates from the sixteenth century. Jewish bankers were already present throughout the Duchy when Cosimo I, Duke of Tuscany, declared Livorno a free port on March 26, 1548, thereby implicitly permitting the presence of Marranos. Three years later, heeding the advice of R. Judah Abrabanel, Cosimo invited eastern Jews to settle in the duchy. More formal license to dwell in Tuscany dates from la Livorna, the letters patent issued by Ferdinand I de' Medici, on June 10, 1593, which guaranteed Marranos immunity from the Inquisition for past transgressions.4

The Jewish community grew rapidly, from a few hundred in the late 1500s to 1,175 in 1642 and about 5,000 (?) in 1689. The community was sufficiently prosperous and commercially successful that, on the urging of Colbert, chief minister of Louis XIV, that monarch offered the Jews of Livorno inducements to move to Marseilles.5

Hebrew printing came relatively late, given the history of printing in Italy, to Livorno. Nevertheless, from the founding of the first press in 1650, the city’s print shops provided, intermittently, the Jewish communities around the Mediterranean with books for several hundred years, into the second-half of the twentieth century. The first of these presses was founded by Jedidiah ben Isaac Gabbai.

Why did Gabbai set up his own print shop? In his introduction to the Yalkut Shimoni, Gabbai first praises the superiority of his edition, and then informs us, in a paragraph replete with biblical paraphrases, that “I girded my loins as a warrior” (cf. Job 38:3, 40:7) after having seen all the possible impediments that can occur in the printer’s craft. Nevertheless, he intends to proceed, and to bring out the most correct and attractive books possible. All other occupations have no value in his eyes. Gabbai disdains silver and gold, gives no consideration to financial loss; his entire purpose is for the communal good, for in the end it is Torah, more precious “than pearls, and all desires cannot compare to

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5 Marcus Arkin, Aspects of Jewish Economic History (Philadelphia, 1975), pp. 114, 124, and 128; Baron, p. 92. D’Ancona (p. 184) gives the population in 1645 as 2,000, noting that there was overcrowding.