

The Most Tenacious of Minorities

The Jews of Italy





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SARA REGUER

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To Raffaele Gershom Fodde

Anna-Alexandra Fodde-Reguer

Elizabeth Ruth Fodde-Reguer

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My interest in the Jews of Italy began in earnest when I married an Italian Jew. What started as a peripheral interest, deepened as I created an undergraduate course on “Italian Jewry” at Brooklyn College. At my students’ urging, and with the support of my family, I then embarked on writing a user-friendly book that could be used in the classroom as well as by the interested public.

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To my husband Raffaele Fodde this book is dedicated in recognition of the profound debt that I owe him in helping this book come into being. His linguistic skills and breadth of knowledge constantly amaze me. It is also dedicated to my two daughters, Anna-Alexandra and Elizabeth Ruth, whose mantra was always, “You can do it!”

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P R E F A C E

I am often asked how I got interested in Italian Jewish history. The simple answer is: I married an Italian Jew. What started off as an interest in differences and similarities in religious customs expanded into a fascination with Italian synagogue architecture and ritual objects and books, and I gradually found myself looking at the “Italian” take on the specific time division of Jewish history. I had noticed, but not really paid attention to, the remarkable number of Italian authors who appear in the prayer book. Having visited Rome as a college student, I knew of the Arch of Titus and the enslavement of the rebellious Jews of Israel, but never really asked about the Jewish community already in Rome at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple.

As a result of my gradually expanding interest, I decided to teach a course on Italian Jewry, knowing that this step would force me to both organize my disconnected reading and search out as much primary source material as I could find. Doing so was a major learning experience for me, and in refining the course over the years, as well as doing research in specific areas that connected to my interests in Middle Eastern Jewish history, Sephardic history, and women’s history, I developed the idea for this book.

I am a strong believer in putting the history of a minority group into the larger context, which is in this case both Italian history and mainstream Jewish history. Italian Jews were Jews as well as Italians. If Italian history and culture is unique, then this created a unique minority group that had characteristics specific to Italy. Jewish history is a history of re-creation of community, and I will attempt to describe how this came about in Italy. The

Preface

Jews arrived in what we now call Italy from Greek-speaking Alexandria and later Byzantium, and from Aramaic-speaking Judea and Iraq. They were later joined by German and Provençal speakers coming from the north, Arabic speakers from the south, and Spanish speakers from Iberia. Except for the earliest groups, Jews arrived in already existing communities which accepted them as fellow Jews, but at the same time both the new arrivals and the members of the existing communities recognized that there were differences. Some of these differences disappeared over the centuries, but others did not, and so we have splinter groups within what was already a small minority. The basic glue holding them together was Judaism. This is true today as well, as Jews moved to Italy from Libya, Lebanon, Iran, and the former Soviet Union. The difference is that now we can witness the re-creation of their communities and their Italianization.

Timeline

GENERAL		JEWISH
Egyptian Kingdom	c. 1280	Exodus from Egypt
Philistines settle the coast of Canaan	c. 1250	Joshua
	c. 1020—1000	Rule of Saul
	c. 1000—961	Rule of David
	961—922	Rule of Solomon
Rise of Assyria	745 721	Fall of 10 northern tribes of Israel
Rise of Babylon	612	
Nebuchadnezzar	605—562	
	597	Yehoyachin and aristocracy exiled to Babylon
	587/6	Fall of Jerusalem, start of Babylonian Exile
Rise of Persia	539	
	538—332	Second Commonwealth under Persia
	516	Second Temple
Roman Republic	509—44	
Alexander the Great / Greece Conquest of Middle East	332	
	332—190	Second Commonwealth under Greeks / Ptolemys / Seleucids
Ptolemys rule Palestine	301—200	
Seleucids rule Palestine	200—168	
	168	Judah Maccabee leads rebellion
Rome and Judea	161	Treaty between Judah and Rome
	160—63	Independent Hasmonean dynasty
Rome conquers Judea	63 BCE	
	63 BCE—70 CE	Second Commonwealth under Rome
Julius Caesar assassinated	44 BCE	
Rome crushes Judean Rebellion	70 CE	Destruction of Second Temple

Chapter 1

EARLY BEGINNINGS

Jewish history begins in the Land of Israel during the Biblical period. The experiences of the three generations of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, the descent of their children to Egypt, their Exodus hundreds of years later led by Moses, the Covenant at Sinai, the entry into the land of Israel and its gradual conquest, and the monarchs and prophets are described in the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible. These writings end with the destruction of the First Temple, in 586 BCE, and the Babylonian Exile. The period of the Second Commonwealth has three stages: the Persian (536—334 BCE), the Greek (334-63 BCE), and the Roman (63BCE—70 CE).

The center of Jewish life during the Persian period, emotionally if not numerically, continued to be the land of Israel. The population center, however, was Babylon, and trade routes brought Jews to the far reaches of the Persian Empire. Gradually, after the Persian authorities allowed the Jews to return and rebuild the western provinces of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, the demographics changed somewhat, particularly when the new Temple in Jerusalem was erected and the Temple service re-established.

However, the exclusive Temple-centered religion of the earlier period was not recreated. One of the survival tactics created in Babylon was the development of the forerunner of the modern synagogue. Judaism proved to be the one ancient religion that, although originally geographically centered on its

Psalm 137, 1-6

By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat and wept,
As we thought of Zion.
There on the poplars
We hung up our lyres
For our captors asked us for songs,
Our tormentors, for amusement
“Sing us a song of Zion.”
How can we sing a song of the Lord
On alien soil?
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand wither.
Let my tongue stick to my palate
If I cease to think of thee,
If I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
Even in my happiest hour.

land of origin and its holy sites there, was resilient after its uprooting. After bemoaning the loss of their independence and their enslavement, the Judeans in Babylon probably began to meet informally on Sabbaths and holidays. What was done at these gatherings is only guesswork, but Torah scrolls were definitely available, as presumably were other books of the *Tanakh*, which was not yet complete. Sages and priests knew how to formulate the calendar, and the earlier exile of their aristocracy provided them with some leadership already in place. By the time the Persians defeated the Babylonians, the idea of a synagogue—a *Bet Kneset* or house of gathering—

was in place. Traveling Jews would have spread these new ideas to other communities.

**Decree of Cyrus the Great,
king of Persia 559-529 BCE,
in Ezra 1, 1-4**

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing as follows: "Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any one of you of all His people—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judah and build the House of the Lord God of Israel, the God that is in Jerusalem; and all who stay behind, wherever he may be living, let the people of his place assist him with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, besides the freewill offering to the House of God that is in Jerusalem."

Therefore, when the Persians allowed the Jews to return to Judea and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, the returnees brought with them the new institution of *Bet Kneset*, and such buildings co-existed with the Temple. There probably was one in every city in Judea, Samaria, and the Galilee, in addition to those in the cities of the diaspora. The synagogue also contributed to the growing importance of the scribe-scholar, who competed with the priests for the religious leadership of the people.

One thing that had changed completely between the time of the first Temple and that of the

second was the tribal structure of the people. The "Israelites," divided into the twelve tribes of antiquity, became the "Jews," whose name was based on the only large tribe to survive exile intact, the tribe of Judah. Any members of the other tribes who had survived had merged with the Judeans. But the returning Jews divided themselves in other ways: one was defined by the

Chapter 1. Early Beginnings

distinctions placed between the Cohen (priest), the Levite, and Israelite, distinctions centered on Temple ritual, which eventually left their traces mainly in synagogue worship. Another division was that of class: there was a small aristocracy at the top, which included wealthy Jews, then a middle class of petty traders and merchants, and finally a large lower class consisting of farmers, herdsmen, and craftspeople. At the very bottom of society were the slaves. One last division, which is in keeping with most societies of the time, was that of gender.

The family continued to be the basic building block of Jewish society. It continued to be patriarchal, with the oldest male at the head of the family making the important decisions relating to his domain. Women also made decisions, but their world was more complex, and matriarchal rights depended on a woman's position in the family. The family was also patrilocal, in that when a couple married, the woman usually moved into the household of her husband, and patrilineal, with one's ancestry usually traced on the male side. The family was also an extended one, with multiple generations living together and each member knowing his or her place in the pecking order. People married within the family if possible, for an endogamous marriage protected the wealth of the family: *mohar*, or brideswealth had to be paid by the groom's side of the family to the bride's side. Such a marriage also ensured the status of the bride and protected her, for her mother-in-law was usually her aunt or cousin, rather than a stranger. First marriages were arranged by family patriarchs or their representatives, and the young people usually had little say. Families were also polygynous, with men who could afford it marrying more than one wife. It is within this context that women's rights were delimited, for her rights differed depending on whether she was a primary wife, a secondary wife, or a concubine. The primary wife obviously had the most power, and she usually ran the women's part of the family structure; her children were guaranteed to inherit the patriarch's wealth.

The Jewish family structure reflected that of general Middle Eastern society at the time, but did not copy it exactly, for Judaism colored every aspect of life including the family structure. For example, religion determined exactly which relatives one could marry and which ones were forbidden.

One aspect of the extended family concept, which in its widest context was part of clan identity, was the idea of helping one's "own." Thus, when

Biblical Verses on Charity

He shall not dominate with harshness over him [the Hebrew slave]. Lev. 25:53

A stranger you shall not wrong nor oppress, for you were a stranger in Egypt. Exod. 22:20

You shall not afflict a widow nor an orphan. Exod. 22:21

You shall not be to him [a needy man] as a demanding creditor. Exod. 22:24

You shall not wholly reap the corner of your field. Neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard.... You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. Lev. 19:9-10

You shall not harden your heart, but you shall surely open wide your hand to him. Deut. 15:7-8

You shall not go back to fetch it ... it shall be for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. Deut. 24:19

a member of a family was in need, other members came to assist him or her. The laws of Judaism extended this by spelling out specific types of charity. For example, one that was quite important for a people anchored in agriculture, the owner of a field had to leave the corners of the field to be harvested by the poor. Additionally, any grains that fell to the ground during the reaping of the field could not be retrieved, but were also left to the poor. In other words, the idea of charity was imprinted on the early Israelites, and this concept was taken with them into Babylon and onward, into whatever places the Jews later found themselves. One of the more important acts of charity, if one could compare them, was considered to be the redemption

of captives. However, this was an expensive undertaking, and it quickly became the responsibility of group effort, centered in the synagogues.

A constant in the lives of the Jews was religious belief. Traditional Jews believe that both the written law and its oral interpretation were handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai. The chain of tradition that followed Moses

was Joshua, the Elders, the prophets, and, after prophecy ended, the men of the *Knesset ha-Gedolah* (the Great Assembly).

Oral tradition was referred to as *halakha* (the path), and it encompassed every aspect of life, from making offerings in the Temple to keeping laws of the Sabbath and holidays, from engaging in

Tractate Avot, mishna 1

Moses received the Law on Sinai and gave it over to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the men of the Great Knesset. They said three things: be deliberate in judgment, teach many disciples, and make a fence around the Law.

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marital relations to upholding criminal law and social order. *Halakha* was based mainly on interpretation of the Biblical text, and over time a set of logical rules was laid out. However, *halakha* was never static, and as new situations arose which presented new dilemmas, the interpreters of Jewish law found logical answers through methods like precedent or analogy. If these methods did not work, they emended the law. Added to this was the development over time of customs, which were not specifically anchored in Biblical commandments.

The study of Torah became part of Jewish life during the Second Temple period, and it became customary to teach children to read as well as study the rules of Judaism. The most talented students could earn the title of *hakham*, “sage,” and it was these sages who both interpreted law and taught it. Various sages gathered around themselves students who participated in intellectual discussion, the most talented of whom would later “inherit” their teachers’ informal schools.

It would be an error to assume that the Jews were a monochromatic people, for they held a variety of opinions and so religious life even in Second Temple Israel was complex and sometimes controversial. One complicating factor was the competing Babylonian center, which, while aware of intellectual developments in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities, developed its own sages and made its own legal decisions. This was especially complex when political borders made travel between Israel and Babylon difficult, such as when the Ptolemys ruled Israel (301-200 BCE) and the Seleucids repeatedly attempted to conquer it. The focus of the *halakhic* discussion in Babylon was geared more to the realities of the diaspora, and thus not much attention was paid, for example, to agricultural laws that only affected the land of Israel, or that focused on Temple ritual and purity. There was also intense Jewish sectarianism in the late Second Temple period, which affected some of the legal decisions.

No matter where Jews lived, they viewed Jerusalem as their spiritual center, for it was the locus of the Temple and the birthplace of their identity. They not only faced Jerusalem as they prayed—for prayer was developing and replacing the traditional offerings, which could only take place in the Temple itself—but they also sent money to pay for its upkeep, specifically the half-shekel required by Jewish law. Diaspora Jews were aware of *halakhic* decisions, and we presume that some of the sages’ students traveled to diaspora communities. News traveled along trade routes, and religious

pilgrims who went to the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate festivals also added to the awareness of new developments.

Central to the re-creation of Jewish communities all over the Middle East and North Africa was the building of synagogues, which functioned as both places of prayer and meeting places. The idea of the synagogue was brought to the northern Mediterranean lands under Greek rule. Alexander the Great defeated the Persian Empire in approximately 334 BCE, and this led to this expansion of Jewish communities westward along the North African coast. Egypt, with the founding of Alexandria, was especially popular, despite the memory of Pharaonic enslavement, for the Jews were attracted to imperial centers with their economic possibilities. After Alexander's death and the division of his empire into three parts, under three dynasties, most of the Jews ended up under either Seleucus I—who obtained Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran—or Ptolemy I—who obtained Egypt and Judea.

Many of the Jews attracted to Alexandria gradually became Hellenized. It is probable that the *Tanakh*, which by then had been more or less

**Legend of the Septuagint,
Tractate *Megilla* 9**

King Ptolemy [3d century BCE] once gathered seventy-two elders. He placed them in seventy-two chambers, each of them in a separate one, without revealing to them why they were summoned. He entered each one's room and said: "Write for me the Torah of Moshe, your teacher." God put it in the heart of each one to translate identically as all the others did.

finalized by the sages in Jerusalem, was translated into Greek for them by a group of Alexandrian scholars, and the *Septuagint*, as this translation was known, included not only the sacred texts known as the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, but also the "External Books," better known by the Greek term *Apocrypha*, which were written between 285 and 244 BCE. Using this translation was a practical response to the lack of traditional Hebrew education, and an important effect of the use of the Greek language was that

it made the texts available to the lower classes as well. The Jewish Bible was thereby prevented from becoming the exclusive property of the priests, sages, and scribes. The translation also enabled the general Greek-speaking public to read the sacred works, thereby attracting converts. When these Greek-speaking Jews moved to the northern Mediterranean cities, they took the *Septuagint* with them as they began to replant communities on the

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Italian peninsula. It is natural for immigrants to try to replant what they are accustomed to, but for Jews it was vital not just to replant, but to re-create their religious and community structures, without which they could disappear as a unique people.

Why did some Jews move to the Italian peninsula? During the long history of the Jewish people, the decision of individuals to move has usually been based on a combination of push-pull effects. The most obvious “push” reason to move was that of safety. Religious persecution in the home country, or even the threat of it, was a major push. Fear of war in the home country, or war actually breaking out, was another. Sometimes the move was made without any choice, for example, when Jews were enslaved. But often it was the “pull” effect of economics that tilted the scale in the decision to move. The home country might have been suffering from a drought or a series of bad crops, or individuals might have felt that there was little possibility of advancing economically. But it was also the stories passed on by travelers, describing other areas as doing well, that played a part in the decision to move, and Rome was rapidly becoming an economic lodestone.

Italian culture was so different from other Mediterranean cultures in part because of the specific qualities of the Etruscans whose civilization lasted from about the tenth century BCE until it fell to the Latin and Sabine tribes in about the year 400 BCE. These 600 years of Etruscan rule laid the groundwork for a culture that stressed an individualistic life geared to happiness, music, merriment, and enjoyment of good things. The Etruscans were scientific farmers and excellent seamen, and when they conquered Rome in about 600 BCE, they transformed it from a primitive village into a great city. However, they were not a nation but rather a group of city-states with separate dialects and no discipline nor organization. It was therefore no surprise that the Etruscans fell to the tribal groups of Latins and Sabines, who then turned southward from Rome to conquer the Greek-controlled south.

The Greeks had entered Sicily in the eighth century BCE, moving northward as far as Naples. It is said that they introduced the olive tree and the grapevine into Italy. Just as important was that they brought in the basics of Western civilization. Their enmity with Carthage, a power that had started as a colony of Phoenicia, was replaced by a similar rivalry with the Romans, who, by the third century BCE, were expanding southward. The Roman Republic, founded in 509 BCE, manifested from the beginning

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the Romans' talents as both organizers and administrators. The gradual development of law was accompanied by the concept of citizenship, which at first was only for free males of the original three tribes of Rome, but was gradually extended to include free slaves and aliens. Citizens enjoyed many immunities and had the right to appeal to the Assembly. Power lay in the hands of the two consuls, who had equal power and were elected for one year, and they were advised by a 300-member Senate. Society was divided into a patrician class, "equites" or well-to-do businessmen, plebes or the common people, which included peasants and workers, and, at the bottom, slaves. It is within this context that the Jews moved to the Italian peninsula.

The two types of Jews who ended up in Italy were from opposite ends of the economic strata: sons of international traders would be sent to set up new outposts for the family trade, and lower-class craftsmen would arrive plying their talents. If the migration pattern followed the historical norm for Jews, the initial immigrants were usually male, but once they had made some money they would send for their wives and children. The majority of Jews who came to Rome in these early stages were of the lower class group. This was the 'pull' reason for the move.

It may have been this community that informed the Jews in the land of Israel of the rising Roman power, which then led to political actions on Judea's part. When the Seleucids took control of Judea in 198 BCE, their ruler, Antiochus III, initially allowed the Jews to continue as a semiautonomous group. But when Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 BCE) took over, things changed drastically. He was not only interested in the Temple in Jerusalem for its treasure, he was also interested in unifying his people, probably in part for idealistic reasons, but certainly in part from a practical perspective: a unified people would be better able to withstand any external force. He embarked on a policy of enforced hellenization, which led to the Maccabean revolt in Judea. It is this revolt that led to the first Jewish document connecting the Jews of the land of Israel with the Romans, the *Book of Maccabees*, one of the books of the *Apocrypha*. The Maccabees, intent on wresting back their independence from the Seleucid Greeks, wanted an ally and found it in the Roman Republic. The *Book of Maccabees* attests to a mutual aid pact between the Hasmonean dynasty and the Roman Republic. But because there is no Roman source to back this up, some scholars claim that it never occurred. According to 1 *Maccabees* 8, Judah had heard about the Romans: