

## Preface

In 1638, a small book of no more than 92 pages *in octavo* was published “appresso Gioanne Calleoni” under the title *Discourse on the State of the Jews and in particular those dwelling in the illustrious city of Venice*. It was dedicated to the Doge and his counsellors, who were labelled “lovers of Truth.” The author of the book was a certain Simone (Simḥa) Luzzatto, a native of Venice, where he lived and died, serving as rabbi for over fifty years during the course of the seventeenth century.

Luzzatto’s political thesis is simple and, at the same time, temerarious, if not revolutionary: Venice can put an end to its political decline, he argues, by offering the Jews a monopoly on overseas commercial activity. This plan is highly recommendable because the Jews are “well-suited for trade,” much more so than others (such as “foreigners,” for example). The rabbi opens his argument by recalling that trade and usury are the only occupations permitted to Jews. Within the confines of their historical situation, the Venetian Jews became particularly skilled at trade with partners from the Eastern Mediterranean countries. Luzzatto’s argument is that this talent could be put at the service of the Venetian government in order to maintain – or, more accurately, recover – its political importance as an intermediary between East and West. He was the first to define the role of the Jews on the basis of their economic and social functions, disregarding the classic categorisation of Judaism’s alleged privileged religious status in world history.

Nonetheless, going beyond the socio-economic arguments of the book, it is essential to point out Luzzatto’s resort to sceptical strategies in order to plead in defence of the Venetian Jews. In fact, he argues that the character of a single individual is unfathomable and that this is even more applicable if one tries to describe the character of a community formed of many individuals. It would therefore be against divine and human law to punish a whole community for the crimes committed by a few individuals. Therefore, the *Discourse* becomes a plea for tolerance in favour of an otherwise unprotected minority, a plea that enriches Luzzatto’s text and shows that he was very well-informed of the contemporary problems faced by Italy and Europe as a whole.

Funded by the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), the university research team located firstly in Halle and now in Hamburg already presented the first results of their research with the first complete edition of Luzzatto’s Italian writings in 2013 and a book of essays on his thought in 2015. Based on the new Italian edition from 2013, the editors of the following translation have taken all previous translations into account. An English translation of some chapters of the book was undertaken by Felix Giovanelli in *Commentary* in 1947. A first incomplete English translation of the *Discorso* was submitted as a PhD by Rabbi Lester Walter Roubey in the same year (1947); a first unpublished attempt to translate the entire text was made by Dr Ariella Lang, Benjamin Ravid, and Giuseppe Veltri some years ago. Nonetheless, this is an original work. In fact, the editors are proud and

happy to present here the first complete English version of the *Discourse* with a commentary, glossary, index, and bibliography, as well as some essays on Luzzatto's work and impact which the reader can find at the end of the book.

We are especially grateful to Benjamin Ravid for his essay that contributes to give a historical context to Luzzatto's works and thought. Finally, we cannot end this preface without thanking Katharine Handel, who was responsible for the language and copy-editing of the book, Ariella Lang for her interest and engagement in our research, Dr Rachel Aumiller for having followed the editorial process of the book, and finally Dr Michela Torbidoni for her long-standing contribution to the project. We are indebted to Dr Albrecht Döhnert, editorial director of the Walter De Gruyter publishing house, for his support and Dr Sophie Wagenhofer, acquisitions editor at De Gruyter, for her helpful advice in all matters of production. Our special thanks are due to our colleagues and the fellows of the Maimonides Centre, among them Professor David Ruderman, Professor Paolo Bernardini, and Professor Diego Lucci, for reading and discussing excerpts of the book and suggesting several improvements.

May this translation alongside the Italian original stimulate new research on the ghetto of Venice. As Simone Luzzatto put it, although the Jews were notoriously in a state of subjection, they applied themselves to study, and it was this application which demonstrated their skill and industry. This was possible because of the protection of their rulers, as Luzzatto sustains (*Discourse*, 85v):

Certainly, the Jews, finding themselves in their present state of subjection and having no freedom whatsoever apart from applying their minds to study and doctrine, should devote themselves to these with all their skill and industry. They should be aware of the fact that the unity of dogmas, the patronage granted by the princes, and the protection from so much oppression were obtained over such a long period of time, humanly speaking, from the learning of a virtuous few. They acquired credibility and authority under those who ruled, since they were deprived of all other means of aspiring to the favours and graces of the great in any other way. [The Jews] should [therefore] rest assured that if they were to lack appreciation deriving from their command of [liberal] letters and the esteem of the virtuous, they would incur a considerable decline and a more despicable oppression than they have ever endured in the past.

Luzzatto's description of the Jewish ghetto as a source of cultural unity ("study and doctrine") in the midst of the Christian society is a novelty in the landscape of Jewish self-definition. Yet in Italy, Jews attempted to participate in the cultural life of their environment, dialoguing with it and contributing to its scientific, philosophical, literary, and theological discourse.

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The editors