



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY  
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

*Evgeny A. Khvalkov, Maksim D. Shkil, Anastasia V. Afanasieva*

**THE PAST OF THE JEWS IN THE SIMONE  
LUZZATTO'S "DISCORSO CIRCA IL STATO DE  
GL'HEBREI ET IN PARTICOLAR DIMORANTI  
NELL'INCLITA CITTÀ DI VENETIA"**

**BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM  
WORKING PAPERS**

**SERIES: HUMANITIES  
WP BRP 207/HUM/2021**

This Working Paper is an output of a research project implemented at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE

*Evgeny A. Khvalkov<sup>1</sup>, Maksim D. Shkil<sup>2</sup>, Anastasia V. Afanasieva<sup>3</sup>*

**THE PAST OF THE JEWS IN THE SIMONE LUZZATTO'S  
"DISCORSO CIRCA IL STATO DE GL'HEBREI ET IN  
PARTICOLAR DIMORANTI NELL'INCLITA CITTÀ DI  
VENETIA"<sup>4</sup>**

This study is focused on the Italian vernacular text written by Simone Luzzatto "Discourse on the State of the Jews". It is important to observe the narrative of this seventeenth century Venetian rabbi in two aspects: firstly, how he tried to incorporate Jews into the Venetian Republic, secondly, how and for what purpose he instrumentalized the past and antiquity. We argue that the treatise of Luzzatto had a fundamental impact on the birth of the Italian version of the Haskalah, which influenced the other versions significantly.

Key words: Early Modern Period, 16-17th centuries, the Other, early modern ethnography.

JEL Classification: Z19

---

<sup>1</sup> National Research University Higher School of Economics (Saint Petersburg). Department of History. Associate Professor. E-mail: ekhvalkov@hse.ru

<sup>2</sup> National Research University Higher School of Economics (Saint Petersburg). E-mail: mdshkil@edu.hse.ru

<sup>3</sup> National Research University Higher School of Economics (Saint Petersburg). E-mail: avafanaseva@edu.hse.ru

<sup>4</sup> The article was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at HSE University in 2021 (grant № 20-04-032 "Languages for describing the Other in early modern Europe: social contexts and repertoires of interpretation").

## Introduction

This study is devoted to the use of the instrumentalization of the past in constructing the narrative of integration and incorporation of the Venetian Jews into the political body of the Republic of Venice in Simone Luzzatto's "Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particular dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia" ("Discourse On The State Of The Jews And In Particular Those Dwelling In The Illustrious City Of Venice")<sup>5</sup> in the mid seventeenth century when their very being in Venice was threatened and the possible expulsion of the Jews was discussed.

The Luzzatto family was known for its representatives of Jewish thought from the second half of the sixteenth to the end of the twentieth centuries<sup>6</sup>. Jacob ben Isaac, Simeon ben Isaac, Moses Hayyim, Samuel David etc. – each of them contributed to the formation of the Italian version of the Haskalah<sup>7</sup>, which Barzilay characterizes by its global orientation, the turn from anti-rationalism to rationalism in the seventeenth century, openness to “secular” knowledge, and also for “rapprochement” between Christian and Jewish scholars. Also, the “late Haskalah” was aimed at a fundamental rethinking of Jewish society and its relation to the state<sup>8</sup>.

In this article we assume that it was Simone Luzzatto who, for the first time from his family of rabbinic intellectuals, began to propagate both the ideas of rethinking Jews as the "Other" to Christian European authorities, and the idea of enlightenment among Jews that eventually would force them to rethink their way of life. In addition to his main idea, which he addressed directly to the Venetian ministers, there are particular “considerations” in the treatise in which the rabbi broadcasts his mega-project to all the Italian Jews living outside the Venetian ghetto.

The historiography based on the works of Simone Luzzatto is extensive. The rabbi wrote two texts in Italian. These are his pamphlet “Socrates” and a treatise on the Jews of Venice, the “Discourse”<sup>9</sup>. The latter generates considerable interest among researchers and is also our main source for this article. In general, they contextualize Luzzatto's theses and consider the text of the "Discourse" from the point of view of the creation of the “myth of Venice” and irony directed to

---

<sup>5</sup> Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particular dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia* (Venezia: Gioanne Calleoni, 1638). Hereinafter we will refer to it as “Discourse”.

<sup>6</sup> “Luzzatto (Luzzatti) Family,” Jewishencyclopedia.com, 2021. <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10203-luzzatto-luzzatti#anchor1>.

<sup>7</sup> David B. Ruderman and Shmuel Feiner, *Early modern culture and Haskalah* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 58 - 59.

<sup>9</sup> Luzzatto, *Discorso* (Venezia, 1638).

the Venetian authorities<sup>10</sup>. We can say that only arguments related to the mercantile idea of Luzzatto, which he addresses to the Venetian authorities, are well developed. Benjamin Ravid, Ariella Lang, Giuseppe Veltri, Anna Lissa and Gianfranco Miletto were the main authors who showed why it was important for the rabbi to defend the Jewish “natione” between 1636 and 1638<sup>11</sup>.

Ravid identified a pattern in the texts of the Venetian Jewish philosophers of different times. They all construct one myth, namely the "myth of Venice". In essence, Jewish writers created the ideal image of Venice as the greatest, fairest, freest Republic in order to maintain the status quo of the "natione" in Venice<sup>12</sup>. Lang continued Ravid's ideas, insisting that the myth is built on a "double edge of irony", since in the same treatise Jewish philosophers could both praise the Venetian Republic for its attitude towards Jews, and allude that Jews still live cramped under tyrannical rule. This is exactly what Semion Luzzatto did, speaking of the essence of the Jews as a submissive and obedient people, despite how tyrannical the state is<sup>13</sup>.

Giuseppe Veltri, Gianfranco Miletto, and Guido Bertolucci revealed the details of the life of the Venetian rabbi and his "discourse". It turns out that the treatise presented at the defense consisted only of a part where Luzzatto tries to apologize for the behavior of Jews and offer the Republic strategies for their rehabilitation into society. The second part, customs and debunking of stereotypes about Jews, was inserted into the treatise later (but definitely written much earlier than 1636)<sup>14</sup>.

Moreover, with the help of Anna Lissa Veltri released a bilingual edition of Luzzatto's "Discourse"<sup>15</sup>. We did not use their translation just because it is literary, but not literal. It targets a wide audience interested in the history of Venice and the history of the Jewish people in general. In our case, it was essential to translate the literal translation without distorting the meaning, since we are interested in the "languages for describing" the Venetian Other.

---

<sup>10</sup> See: Benjamin Ravid, “Between the Myth of Venice and the Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History: The Case of the Jews of Venice,” in Bernard Cooperman and Barbara Garvin, eds., *The Jews of Italy: Memory and Identity* (Bethesda, MD: University of Maryland Press, 2000), 151-192. Ariella Lang, “The Double Edge of Irony in Simone Luzzatto's Discorso,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 15 / 3 (2009): 114-133.

<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Veltri, Gianfranco Miletto, and Guido Bartolucci, “The last will and testament of Simone Luzzatto (1583?-1663) and the only known manuscript of the (1638) Newly discovered manuscripts from the state archive of Venice and the Marciana library, Venice,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 5 / 1 (2011): 125-146.

<sup>12</sup> Cooperman and Ravid, “Between the Myth of Venice,” 175.

<sup>13</sup> Ariella Lang, “The Double Edge of Irony,” 123.

<sup>14</sup> Veltri, Miletto, and Bartolucci, “The Last Will,” 131.

<sup>15</sup> Simone Luzzatto, “Discourse On The State Of The Jews And In Particular Those Dwelling In The Illustrious City Of Venice,” *Discourse on the State of the Jews: Bilingual Edition* edited by Giuseppe Veltri and Anna Lissa, 3-242 (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110527988-002>

As we can see, all works revolve around the apologetic part of Luzzatto's treatise. Thus, the first part of the treatise overshadows the second, no less significant and practically unexplored. In the context of the activities of our project "Languages for describing the Other", the treatise has a research potential in the study of the narrative of the description of the past and the incorporation of the Other into the political body of the Venetian Republic.

Therefore, we want to focus on Luzzatto's narrative in two directions. Firstly, we want to show how Luzzatto constructed the Jewish identity and what project he proposed to the Venetian authorities. Secondly, it is also important for us to scrutinize the languages of description of the past and antiquity through which he tried to advance his project for all the Jews.

Simone (Simcha) Luzzatto (1583 – 1663) was a Venetian Jewish intellectual, whose family came from the Lausitz (Latin Lusatia), in Germany in the fifteenth century. He was a rabbi (and shared the rabbinate of Venice with Leon of Modena) at the “Scuola Grande Tedesca” (“The Great German School”) or “Scuola Luzzatta” as he mentioned in his testament to the notary<sup>16</sup>. As Squarcini and Capelli stressed<sup>17</sup>, behind these words one can see the central synagogue in Venetian ghetto in seventeenth century<sup>18</sup>. His father, Isaac Luzzatto, was a wealthy entrepreneur, who owned rental property and loan bank in the ghetto, was involved in intercity and international trade, and also engaged in maritime insurance<sup>19</sup>. Simone Luzzatto inherited from his father both the maritime insurance business and the rental property management in the ghetto.

Luzzatto was a prolific writer, an official translator from Hebrew for the Venetian authorities, and a Jewish rabbi in the seventeenth century Venice. He got traditional Rabbinical Talmudist training from private teachers in his youth, however, besides his religious formation, he was well-read in Classical Greek and Latin literature. His publications (chiefly *responsa* on Talmudic issues, Halakha and Tanakh) were widely known, read, discussed, and quite popular in the Jewish community, where he already was known as an outstanding intellectual when he was twenty-two years old as a *litteratus* and intellectual; another famous work is his “Socrates”, a treatise on gnoseology, where he argued that divine revelation is required for the human reason in order to attain knowledge and that the human mind cannot achieve its goals unless it is assisted by

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>17</sup> Chiara Camarda, Tracing the Hebrew Book Collection of the Venice Ghetto (doctoral thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2016 - 2017). <http://dspace.unive.it/bitstream/handle/10579/10315/810270-1186436.pdf?sequence=2>.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the Luzzatto's Scuola, the ghetto also had two large synagogues (and several small ones), often named by Jews after the Jewish families. There were Scuola Coanim and Scuola Meshullamim that were founded by private families of Ashkenazi origin. See: Ibid, 232.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Ravid, “The Venetian Context of ‘The Discourse’,” in Simone Luzzatto, Discourse on the State of the Jews: Bilingual Edition, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Anna Lissa (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 243-274.

divine revelation ('how foolish human understanding is, while it is not directed by divine revelation' in the subtitle on the cover).

However, the features of the early modern period, the era Luzzatto lived in, with its Age of Discovery, Scientific Revolution, and other big changes may have influenced his mindset and way of writing. Luzzatto was well acquainted with ancient classical literature (Plato, Virgil, Tacitus etc.). He often quoted in his writings the Humanists contemporary to him. Unlike many of the previous Jewish writers, he was enough mentally and culturally open to fully embrace the Renaissance Humanist culture and scientific knowledge,<sup>20</sup> although detaching them from the sacred sphere of the divine revelation.

He was the author of the aforementioned "Discourse". Indeed, in this treatise we can see the narrative comprising the account on the antiquity of the Jews, presented, however, to the Venetian, and, in broader terms, European audience, for whom the Jews were an internal Other, thus being an account on the Other and their antiquity / past produced by the Other. The "Discourse"<sup>21</sup> was completed in 1638 and, unlike previous works by Luzzatto, was written in Italian rather than in Hebrew, being aimed at a broader European audience beyond the Jewish community.

Luzzatto largely relied on such sources of authoritative knowledge as the classical texts, medieval texts, and contemporary historical narratives; Luzzatto's 'Discorso' is explicitly framed into both biblical and classical chronological scheme and the set of historical narratives, and he used a broad array of Biblical and Classical sources, however, for him, as a Jewish Rabbi and as a Renaissance intellectual very well-educated both in the ancient literature and philosophy and in contemporary literature, these sources can be hardly described as the sources coming from the Other. Apparently, he made use of different written records, including the conventional historical narratives of several classical Greek and Roman writers.

Notably, the pamphlet bears dedication to the Doge and other authorities of the Serenissima rather than to the leaders (chiefly rabbinate) and the Jewish community of Venice, as it was customary before him. The text of Luzzatto (eighteen "considerations") can be divided in at least two parts, the one essential part dedicated to the contribution of the Jews in Venetian commerce and economy in general, and the other – to religious and cultural issues.

---

<sup>20</sup> Robert Bonfil, "Changing mentalities of Italian Jews between the periods of the Renaissance and the Baroque," in *Italia* 11 (1994), 61-79.

<sup>21</sup> Riccardo Bachi, "Saggio sul "Discorso" di Simone Luzzatto sulle condizioni degli ebrei nella diaspora," in R. Bachi, *Israele disperso e ricostruito: pagine di storia ed economia* (Roma, 1952), 97-139.

The political agenda of Luzzatto in favor of Jewish community was clear: in the period of the expulsion of the Jews from the Italian and European states, when their very being in Venice was endangered (indeed the possibility of the decision on expulsion of Jews from Venice was discussed by the Venetian authorities<sup>22</sup>), Luzzatto wrote an apologetic pamphlet, arguing against the intolerances and prejudices and legitimizing the right of Jews to live in the Republic. Luzzatto admonished to toleration towards the Jews, who were in many ways beneficial for Venice,<sup>23</sup> because they carry on the activities, which would have otherwise been done by the foreigners, but with the Jewish presence are controlled by the Republic. Luzzatto's attempt was successful – the Doge opposed the expulsion of Jews and let them stay in Venice.

The “Discourse” of Luzzatto was aimed both at the Venetian authorities (who eventually were the decision-makers) and at the broader Venetian audience (he underlines specifically that those who wanted to expel the Jews are just some of the patricians driven by the religious zeal, whereas the common people tolerated Jews, being in many respects dependent on them). The whole structure of the pamphlet of Luzzatto is designed in such a way so as to serve the political and economic agenda. There are naturally almost no chorographic descriptions. One can say that Luzzatto partly used an antiquarian approach and the political rhetoric typical of the Renaissance, which is logical given his array of reading and Humanist background; however, it is only used instrumentally for the ‘higher’ goals. Same is true regarding his discursive schemes, manner of description, references to antiquity etc. – they are all intended to serve his political agenda.

As we have already mentioned, Luzzatto's “Discourse” comprised two parts<sup>24</sup>. He used the first one as an apologia of the Jews in Venice that rabbi composed specifically for the Venetian authorities between 1636 and 1638 during the times of accusations of the Jews concerning their involvement in theft<sup>25</sup>. There Luzzatto presented his main ideas, which were connected with mercantilism and “ragion di stato” (state interest)<sup>26</sup> concerning Jews as useful minority of merchants in order to avoid their expulsion from Venice. The second part of the rabbi's treatise is devoted to the customs and culture of the Jews. We argue that despite the fact that the second part

---

<sup>22</sup> Cecil Roth, *Gli ebrei in Venezia*, (Roma, 1933), pp. 227-231. *Gli Ebrei e Venezia. Secoli XIV-XVIII*. Atti del Convegno, Venezia, 1983, ed. G. Cozzi (Milan, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Ravid, *Economics and toleration in seventeenth century Venice: the background and context of the Discorso of Simone Luzzatto* (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 7-9.

<sup>24</sup> Veltri, Miletto, and Bartolucci, “The Last Will and Testament,” 129.

<sup>25</sup> As Veltri, Miletto, and Bartolucci observed, it was the stolen goods from well-known shop “Merceria” which were discovered in the Ghetto that catalyzed a new portion of accusations of Jews. *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>26</sup> Abraham Malamhed, “Simone Luzzatto on Tacitus: apologetica e ragione di Stato,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish history and literature*, ed. I. Twerski, 2 (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 143-170.

had been written to some extent for a Christian audience, it broadcasted the main manifesto that Luzzatto propagated among the Venetian Jewish “natione”<sup>27</sup>.

### **The mercantile idea of “Discourse”**

What exactly did Simone Luzzatto suggest to the Venetian authorities? In his treatise he wanted not only to apologize for appropriate behavior of some Jews that had recently stolen the valuable goods, but “only to demonstrate that the said “natione” is not at all a useless member of the common people of the said City”<sup>28</sup>. The rabbi wanted to include the Jews in the city’s life to show that they could bring a lot of benefits for the greater good of the Republic of Venice.

Thus, we know that Luzzatto was well aware of the importance of the identities that the Venetian authorities assigned to certain people. There were nobles that monopolized all political rights and power, could participate in commerce both in Venice and outside of it, on the international trade level. Also, there were the “cittadini originarii” (“original citizens” that were citizens by birth). Unlike the nobles, they had no political power. The majority of them were employed in the upper echelons of the Venetian civil service and the others participated in urban professions such as medicine, notarial art and scribal services or became lawyers<sup>29</sup>.

The majority (about ninety per cent) of the population of Venice were the “*popolo minuto*”. They had no political rights and often served as the laborers that maintained the city in function. This identity included sick and mostly unemployed individuals who also had the right to request citizenship. They could have “*cittadinanza de intus*” (“internal citizenship”) that allowed individuals from “*popolo minuto*” to participate in trade activities and acquire real estate. Furthermore, all the citizens (including those who had “*cittadinanza de intus*”) had an opportunity to gain the “*cittadinanza de intus et de extra*” (“internal and external citizenship”) which required twenty five years of residence as taxpayers in Venice<sup>30</sup>.

---

<sup>27</sup> This concept is presented unchanged. It is one of the identities that was established in the official discourses of the Venetian Republic. Firstly, the term "natione" was understood as a “non-Venezianità” in sense of exclusion from citizens of Venice. Secondly, the term represents the religious, cultural and linguistic minority (Greeks, Germans, Jews, etc. that migrated to Venice), which also had the opportunity to create a local "scuola" (confraternity). See: Benjamin Ravid, “Venice and its Minorities,” in Eric R. Dursteler, ed., *A Companion to Venetian History, 1400-1797* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 449-485

<sup>28</sup> “...solo dimostrare non esser detta nazione affatto inutil membro del comun popolo di detta Città” - Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particolar dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia* (Venezia, 1638), 6.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Ravid, “Venice and its Minorities,” 450.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 451.



In his “Discourse” Luzzatto formulated the mercantile idea that the Republic of Venice would only benefit if it allows Jewish “natione” to trade freely outside the city<sup>31</sup>: “Among the benefits and profits that Jewish nation brings to the city of Venice, the most important is the profit that results from mercantile activity, a profession that is almost its own...”<sup>32</sup>. In this sense, Luzzatto understood that the Jews had been almost completely excluded from city life. As Francesca Travellato suggested, the rabbi understood that by offering Jews as merchants, the state would get safe allies that would not compete with the Catholic part of the Republic of Venice and would not be able to wage commercial wars<sup>33</sup>. Luzzatto's main goal was to make the Jews a beneficial and profitable part of the city. He wanted to ask the Venetian authorities to permit the free trade for the Jews while maintaining their "natione" status.

In order to develop his mercantile thesis, the rabbi wanted to show the Venetian authorities the difference between the ordinary foreigners who visit the city and the Venetian Jews that he called “*come sempre esteri*” (“as always strangers”). Luzzatto believed that ordinary foreigners did not make the city richer, but rather only contributed to its economic stagnation: “...after being satisfied with their earnings, foreigners take it back to their homelands, and these are succeeded by other foreigners with the same talent, so that the transport of the money accumulated by the city always continues, without any increase in wealth in the city, but rather an evident detriment follows... <...> Thus the influx of foreigners from different regions does not alter and enrich the cities, because with the continual reflux the money acquired is transmitted to the places where the foreigners came from...”<sup>34</sup>.

On the contrary, being “strangers as always”, the Jews had no homeland: “But it seems that the aforementioned drawback is admirably remedied by the trafficking practiced by the Hebrews, since they do not have a homeland of their own to which they aspire to transport their possessions

---

<sup>31</sup> It was not prohibited for Jewish people to have their pawnshops and small stores of kosher food in the ghetto. See: Ibid. P. 481.

<sup>32</sup> “che fra li giovamenti, et utili, che la natione hebrea apporta alla città di Venetia, principalissimo è il profitto, che dall’essercitio mercantile ne risulta, professione quasi di lei propria.” Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl’Hebrei*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Francesca Trivellato, *The Promise and Peril of Credit* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 126.

<sup>34</sup> “...dopo l’essere satolli de guadagni, li conducono nelle loro patrie, et a questi parimente succedano altri esteri con l’istesso talento, di modo che sempre continua il trasporto del danaro ammassato dalla città, senz’alcun augumento di ricchezze in essa, ma piuttosto ne segue evidente detrimento... <...> Così l’influsso d’esteri da diverse reggioni, non altera, et arricchisce le città, perché con il continuo reflusso viene trasmesso il danaro acquistato alli lochi ove quelli forastieri derrivarono.” – Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl’Hebrei*, 13.

amassed in the city”<sup>35</sup>. Like many Italian Jewish writers before him, he constructs the “myth of Venice” as a great, just, wealthy and prosperous republic<sup>36</sup>.

He had put this topos for a reason. In this way, Luzzatto wanted to attract the attention of the Venetian authorities to the thesis of the integration of the Jews into the republic’s economic life. The rabbi insisted that despite the fact that the Jews did not have a homeland, they had the just Republic that they could have called their homeland: “Most of all, it holds them firm and attached to the city and its state with the exemplary justice administered in their defense against any order of people who offend them either in life or in property, with the punctual observance of all that is promised in their conduct and privileges”<sup>37</sup>.

Moreover, Luzzatto presented the corporal theory of the Venetian republic, where the Jews occupied the position of the foot “...which treads on the ground, being inferior to all the other members, is not a disadvantage to any of them, but still supports them”<sup>38</sup>. By writing this, the rabbi built a hierarchical relationship in which the Jews were the lower strata of the Venetian structure. Nevertheless, figuratively speaking, Luzzatto implied that without the Jews, the body of the republic would not have been able to “stand” and “walk”. This is a big claim to a place in corporal theory. The rabbi insists that the state “will not fall” and can comfortably “stand” on the Jewish nation alone.

Thus, we can say that Luzzatto constructed the identity of the Venetian Jews<sup>39</sup>. The rabbi was not only trying to maintain the status quo for the Jews, as Ravid and Lang say, but he wanted to show how the skills of the “nation” can be used for the prosperity of the Venetian Republic. If previously the Venetian authorities had not known what to do with them and how to call them apart from the “nation”, the rabbi proposed to the authorities a project, according to which the Jews were given a significant place in the body of the Republic. If previously the Venetian authorities had been more likely to agree with the *cittadini* and clergy about the expulsion of Jews

---

<sup>35</sup> “Ma al sopradetto inconveniente pare che mirabilmente sovenga, e rimedia il traffico maneggiato dagli Hebrei, non havendo essi propria patria alla quale aspirano di trasportare li loro haveri ammassati nella città”. Ibid, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Ravid Benjamin, *Between the Myth of Venice and the Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History. The Case of Jews of Venice*, 151-192.

<sup>37</sup> “Ma più di tutto li tien fermi, et annessi alla città, e suo Stato l’esemplare giustizia somministrata in loro difesa contro qualsivoglia ordine di persone che li offendesse sì nella vita che nella robba, con osservarli puntualmente tutto quello che nelle loro condotte, e privilegi gli è promesso” – Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl’Hebrei*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> “rassembra l’Hebreo quella parte del piede, che calpesta la terra la quale essendo inferiore a tutti gli altri membri a niun di loro è di agravio, ma li sostiene ancora”. Ibid, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Pohl, *Historiography and Identity: Methodological Perspectives // Historiography and Identity I: Ancient and Early Christian Narratives of Community / W. Pohl and V. Wieser (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 7-50.*

from Venice, now they should have seen how their abilities could have been used for the benefit of the “public affair” in the meaning of *politeia* or reciprocal relations of a balanced type. The authorities would have seen how to derive mercantile benefits from relations with Jews for the entire Republic. In this case, Luzzatto spoke to the Venetian authorities on behalf of the entire Jewish community of the Venetian ghetto as the apologete of the “natione”<sup>40</sup>.

### **Instrumentalization of the past in Luzzatto’s ‘Discorso’**

As we said before, Luzzatto's treatise was composed of at least two parts. The first part was composed between 1636 and 1638 and expressed a mercantile idea that was intended to include Jews in the active life of the Venetian Republic. The second part was devoted to customs and peculiarities of Jewish thought and culture, which the rabbi most likely wrote much earlier<sup>41</sup>. In this part Luzzatto not only debunked stereotypes and enlightened the Christian European audience about the culture of Jews, but also broadcasted his main idea, which he addressed directly to the Italian Jews.

Defending the Jewish community, Luzzatto quotes Tacitus about the Jewish "hostile hatred of all others";<sup>42</sup> here he argues against Tacitus and stresses the usefulness of Jews in the context of the "reason of state," or ‘Ragion di Stato,’ introduced to the intellectual environment by Giovanni Botero<sup>43</sup>, and the idea of the importance of religion for the rulers for maintaining political order<sup>44</sup>. In the treatise of Luzzatto the historical past of the Jews is instrumentalized. He repeatedly stresses that the Jews were subjected to constant persecution. The treatise was written to enlighten not only the Venetian authorities (see on the political context above), but also the broader Venetian audience about Jews and to eliminate "stereotypes" about the Jewish people. Luzzatto, being a

---

<sup>40</sup> Walter Pohl mentioned Josephus Flavius as a spokesman for the Jews and a defender of knowledge. In this, Luzzatto is similar to him and it is possible that he is likened to a philosopher. Ibid, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Veltri, Miletto, and Bartolucci, “The Last Will and Testament,” 131.

<sup>42</sup> Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Historiarum libri*, ed. Ch. Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), V.2.1, V.3.1, V.4.1, V.5.1-5, V.8.2.

<sup>43</sup> Giovanni Botero, *Della ragione di stato, libri dieci. Di Giouanni Botero Benese, reuisti dall'autore, e arricchiti in più luoghi di discorsi, e di cose memorabili etc.* (Roma: presso Vincenzo Pellagallo, 1590).

<sup>44</sup> Bernard Septimus, “Biblical religion and political rationality in Simone Luzzatto, Maimonides and Spinoza,” in *Jewish thought in the seventeenth century*, ed. I. Tversky, B. Septimus (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 399-443.

rabbi, conceives of the Jews both from his own position of a Jew and from the position of a Christian European, thus discursively making them the Other.<sup>45</sup>

Also, Luzzato viewed himself as a Rabbi in the sense, who “possesses knowledge of the traditions of the observance and execution of the rituals contained in the Law. These [traditions] persisted orally for many years, from the time of the law [in Sinai] to the reign of Emperor Antoninus”.<sup>46</sup> Luzzatto pointed out that rabbis and Jewish philosophers support and revive an interest in knowledge in the Jewish nation.

The rabbi cited general opinions that promote hatred against Jews: “... there are those who argue that it was not the Jews who introduced the import of goods and the art of negotiating, but rather they were usurpers. They say that in the old days, when the city flourished thanks to business operations, the townspeople controlled the trade, but gradually the Jews seized control and became the sole masters of trade, much to the detriment of other townspeople and the town itself. They add that it was not Jews who brought goods to Venice. On the contrary, the true factors that allowed trade and goods to flourish were the city's delightful location, the convenience of the seaport, the proximity of navigable rivers, the proximity of Germany, the freedom of life, the safety of goods, and the abundance and perfection of the arts”.<sup>47</sup>

In this sense, Luzzatto expressed the perception of the Jews as the invaders who stole a chance from townspeople to lead the trade. During his narrative, he assured the reader that the

---

<sup>45</sup> «La nazione hebrea altro tanto che nelli secoli passati fù celebre, e preclara per humane prosperità, e divini favori, hor'è conosciuta si per l'incontro de sciagure, come per la continuata, e costante tolleranza in esse, frà quali non è la minore, il mancamento di quelle dotrine, e eruditioni che le farebbono state necessarie per esporre, e manifestare se stessa al sincero giudizio de più prudenti, con recidere, e trocarli quelli freggi d'infamia, e mendacità, che la condizione de tempi, e la irrisione de più volgari le ha intessuto per il che con quel minimo di talento mi ha concesso la divina Maestà, mi son proposto nell'animo formare compendioso, ma verace racconto de fuoi Ritti principali, e opinioni più comuni dall'universale non dissonanti, e discrepanti, nella quale applicazione ho procurato con ogni mio potere (benche lo sia della istessa nazione) astenermi da qualunque assetto, e passione che dal vero deviare mi potesse, così spero incontrare discreto lettore, che vacuo d'ognianticipa to, e preoccupato giudizio non sia per seguire il volgare costume, di solo approbare, e sentir bene de avventurati, e felici, e sempre dannare li abbattuti, e afflitti; ma con retto giudizio sarà per bilanciare quello in tal proposito mi ha dettato la mia imperfezione, tralasciarò il considerare a lungo l'antichità della stirpe». Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> “Rabbini appresso gli Hebrei sono quelli che s’attribuiscono havere le traditioni del modo d’osservare, et essequire li riti contenuti nella Legge, che per gran corso d’anni si confermò vocalmente, dal tempo della legislatione infino l’età d’Antonino imperatore”. Ibid, 76.

<sup>47</sup> Ma perché giamai non fu sì indubitata evidentia ch’alla solertia humana mancasse apertura d’oppugnarla, così vi sono alcuni, ch’insurgano con dire non essere altrimenti li Hebrei introduttori, et apportatori delle mercantie, e contrattazioni, ma piuttosto di quell’occupatori, e che antica- mente, anzi mentre che la città fioriva di affari, erano maneggiati li negotii da proprii cittadini, e li Hebrei in progresso di tempo se ne sono fatti d’essi traffici in gran parte arbitri, e padroni, con gran danno de cittadini, e dell’istessa città, soggiungendo non essere li Hebrei quelli, ch’adducano le mercantie, ma il mirabile sito della città, la commodità del porto di mare, vicinanza di fiumi navigabili, aprossimatione della Germania, libertà del vivere, sicurezza delle facultà, copia e perfettione dell’arti essere li veri atrattivi e condutteri di merci e negotii, e senza l’industrie vigilanza delli Hebrei il tutto capitarebbe necessariamente in mano de proprii cittadini. Ibid, 10.

Venetian merchants left the trade because they did not need it - they needed to take free lands and find less perilous occupations while at the same time the Jews could not do without this activity despite the fact that it was hazardous for them as well. In this fragment Luzzatto tends to demonstrate how controversial these opinions seemed. At least, relying on his words. He shows that, on one hand, the Jews' image is represented as the image of invaders, on the other hand, there is an opinion that 'it was not Jews who brought goods to Venice'. Appealing to the argument of these general opinions, he shows the absurdity of these statements because the statement which assured that the success of Venice consists only in a privileged position of Venice negates the significance of the contribution of Venice's townspeople as well.

It is worth emphasizing that all residents of Venice were required to know the Italian vernacular. Largely due to the existence of the rabbi and "Scuole" (synagogues), Jews knew and read not only Jewish texts, but also Italian and Latin ones (sometimes including fiction). As it turns out, the Jews from the Venetian ghetto were more educated than their non-Jewish neighbors, because education was considered the main point of the Jewish upbringing<sup>48</sup>. The rabbis often gathered all Jews in synagogues in order to give them a lecture on Jewish law, history, and also talk about problems with the Venetian government.

It is possible that Luzzatto turned not so much to the Venetian Jews, but rather to the entire Jewish people disseminated all over the world. He could already express and promote his idea more than once at general meetings. The idea that he expressed in the book is finalized and addressed to those Italian Jews who have not yet heard it.

What did the rabbi want to say to the Jews? Like Flavius Josephus, Luzzatto is a keeper of knowledge about the past of the Jewish people who introduced to his audience the time before the "long and miserable scattering" ("lunga e miserabile dispersione")<sup>49</sup>. He constructed the concept of "anticamente", which he divided into three parts. Firstly, the rabbi mentioned the times when the Jewish people were united. Moreover, he referred to Eusebius of Caesarea as an authoritative source that would have confirmed and legitimized the notion that the Jews: "were no less clear and illustrious for the exertion of their letters and sciences, since it is attributed by universal consensus that they were the birthplace of the most worthy doctrines"<sup>50</sup>.

---

<sup>48</sup> Veltri, Miletto, and Bartolucci, "The Last Will and Testament," 131.

<sup>49</sup> Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei*, 74

<sup>50</sup> "chiari et illustri, per l'essercitio delle lettere e scientie, poichè dal consenso universale gli è attribuito ch'appresso di loro hebbero li natali le più degne dottrine, e come Eusebio egregiamente nel Libro della Preparatione lo dimostra". Ibid, 73.

Secondly, Luzzatto led his narrative to the times of the Roman Empire as the conqueror of the Jews. It is the Roman Empire that was responsible for scattering the people around the world. The Empire divided the “natione” and contributed to the degradation of the Jewish culture: “...but after they had agreed to yield to the divine decree and were subjugated by the Romans, the Temple destroyed, the city invaded, religion oppressed, the people captivated and dispersed, not only did they lose all military glory, their spirit became debased and weakened, but all light of knowledge was almost extinguished in them, and all splendor of learning was obscured, since virtue must be accompanied and held back by the comforts of life”<sup>51</sup>. As Luzzatto noted, the Jews were unique in succeeding to fight against the subjugation, and then, it should be perceived as their advantage, they suffered for it. He glamorized the history of his “natione” to show their particular condition of constant self-sacrifice as well as in the case with the trade. The rabbi wanted to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Jews. He presented as a brave and elaborate act even the fact that the Jews gave up ‘for cruel reprisals’.

Thirdly, Greece was significant for Luzzatto's narrative of the “anticamente”. He primarily focused on the Greeks and their culture, which had been known for its arts and sciences. According to the rabbi, this was precisely what the Roman Empire failed to utterly enslave: “Although Greece was placed under the Romans while it was flourishing with doctrines, it was so celebrated that it formed at its own will those minds that were to give them laws, and for this reason it was doubtful whether the Romans subjugated the Greeks by violence and empire...”<sup>52</sup>.

Luzzatto purposefully referred to the Roman Empire in his narrative. As we have mentioned, during “anticamente” Jewish culture flourished largely due to its independence. The Empire was the main cause of both the decline of culture and the dispersal of Jews around the world. In the present, for Luzzatto, the state of submission and “enslavement” was preserved. The Venetian Republic clearly separated Jews from the general population (even from the “*popolo minuto*”) of Venice and did not allow them to live as ordinary people. Indeed, we can really assume (as Ariella Lang proposed<sup>53</sup>) that Luzzatto used irony when describing the situation of the Jews in

---

<sup>51</sup> “ma dopo che convenendoli cedere al divino decreto furono soggiogati da Romani, distrutto il Tempio, invasa la città, oppressa la religione, captivato e disperso il popolo, non solamente hanno perduto affatto ogni militar gloria, invilitosi et infiacatosi affatto d’animo, ma anco quasi s’estinse in loro ogni lume di sapere, e si oscurò qualunque splendore di eruditione, poiché vogliono le virtù essere accompagnate e trattenute dalli agi e comodità della vita”. Ibid, 74.

<sup>52</sup> “La Grecia benché sotto posta a Romani mentre che fioriva de dottrine fu celebratissima, tanto che a suo arbitrio formava quelli animi che li dovevano poi dar leggi, e per tal causa si rendeva dubbioso se li Romani soggiogarono li Greci con la violenza et imperio...”. Ibid, 74.

<sup>53</sup> Ariella Lang, “The Double Edge of Irony in Simone Luzzatto’s Discorso,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 15, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2009): 114 –133.

Venice. The rabbi mentioned that the Jews are forced to put up with this attitude, because outside the city they will be treated even worse.

Greece was able to maintain its “Self” even when the Roman Empire conquered it. Thus, the author believed that Greek culture still had a much greater impact on the whole world (especially on its European part) than Roman culture. However, Luzzatto emphasized that all the glory and fame of Greece had been frozen in the past: “But after they were inundated with barbarism and deprived of science and great arts, they became unknown to the world”<sup>54</sup>. Greece literally dissolved in “barbarie”, and their culture entered the stage of complete degradation.

Thus, Luzzatto specifically included the images of the Roman Empire and Greece in “anticamente”. He divided them into two significant models from which a lesson could be drawn for the Jewish “nation”. As we mentioned earlier, the Greek one was associated with the “noble arts and sciences”, while the Roman one – with the conquests and military reputation. The Jewish nation in its best times embodied both of these two models. At the same time, the Jews fell under the Roman conquest, but turned out to be one among the few ‘nations’ who tried to regain their freedom and defend their religion. Emperors Vespasian and Titus even “doubted their chances of victory”<sup>55</sup>.

However, after the final Roman conquest, the Jewish nation lost these two models. Luzzatto wrote that military defeat (as opposed to the Roman model) is nothing compared to the loss of the “light of knowledge”, that is, inspiration or sensitivity to art (the Greek model): “...for although the loss of military reputation leads to submission and obedience, it does not result in the loss of the honour and glory of the people, even though they are obedient to others: there are few cities that are dominant at all, and an infinite number that are subject, and yet the shining rays of virtue shine in them”<sup>56</sup>. Nevertheless, the rabbi emphasized that the Greek model is imperfect: it relied only on the old knowledge and art. He suggested to take into account the mistakes of these two models and to apply them to the benefit of the Jewish “nation”.

Therefore, the narrative of “anticamente” helped him prepare the ground for his main thesis, which he addressed to all the Jews around the world: the rabbi insisted that the Jews need not only to preserve the old culture, but to constantly generate new knowledge and improve their art.

---

<sup>54</sup> “Ma dopo che inondando la barbarie furono privi de scientie, et egregie arti, riuscirono appresso il mondo ignoti e sconosciuti,” 74.

<sup>55</sup> Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei*, 71.

<sup>56</sup> “ché sebbene il decadere dalla reputatione militare cagiona la soggettione e l’obedienza, nulla di meno non ne risulta però il perdere affatto l’honore e la gloria de popoli benché ad altrui siano ossequenti: rare sono le città affatto dominanti, infinite le soggette che tuttavia risplende in loro fulgenti raggi di virtù”. Ibid, 74.

Otherwise, the “natione” is doomed to dissolve in “barbarie” as the Greeks, and to live only by the past greatness: “And for certain the Hebrews finding themselves in the present state of subjection, having nothing free but the employment of their minds in studies and doctrines must apply themselves to this with all their thoughts... And they must be certain, that lacking in them the openness of the humanities, and the esteem of the virtuous, they are to incur in some notable decline, and more despicable oppression, than they have already suffered in the past”<sup>57</sup>.

Returning to the times of the recent past, Luzzatto pointed out that throughout the “long and miserable dispersion” the Jewish culture was in decline and degradation. The rabbi insisted that the Jewish people survived only thanks to God. It was he who directed the Jews all this time for a reason that is known only to him: “The Jews were not subjected to similar mutations and changes, but they were broken and divided into almost infinite portions, distracted and dispersed throughout the universe, with most of their essential identity remaining. And there is no doubt that by themselves they would not have had the strength to oppose the edacity of time, and to exempt themselves from its fierce insults for so long a period of 1600 years or so, but this depends on the will of the Divine Majesty, preserving them for purposes manifest to him”<sup>58</sup>.

Again making the recent past instrumental, Luzzatto explicitly says that without the Jews there would not have been Venice in its present appearance: ‘Accordingly, we see that where the Jews lived, trade and business flourished, as evidenced by the example of Livorno. And the city of Venice will never forget the first creator of the port of Spalato, who was Jewish by birth and who, thanks to his commercial connections, transferred the trade of much of the East to the city. This port is now considered the city's most solid foundation of trade, prevailing over all other routes, just as the mainland is much safer and less prone to blows of fate than the sea.’<sup>59</sup> The Jews, he says, did much for the prosperity of Venice as a trade center connecting Europe with the East.

---

<sup>57</sup> “E per certo gli Hebrei ritrovandosi nel stato presente di soggettione, non havendo altro di libero affatto che l’impiego della loro mente ne studii, e dottrine, doverebbono in ciò applicarsi con ogni loro pensiero... E devono esser certi, che mancando in loro l’apretamento delle lettere, e la stima de virtuosi, sono per incorrere in alcuna notabile declinatione, e più disprezzabile oppressione, che per il passato giamai hanno patito”. Ibid, 86.

<sup>58</sup> “La hebrea non li occorre simili mutationi, e cangiamenti, ma bene si spezzò, e fu divisa quasi in infinite porzioni, distrata, e dispersa per tutto l’universo, restandole in gran parte l’identità della sua essentialità. E non è dubbio, che per se stessa non haverebbe avuto tanto vigore di oppondersi alla edacità del tempo, et esimersi dalli suoi fieri insulti per sì lungo tratto di 1600 anni in circa, ma ciò dipende dal volere della Divina Maestà, perservandola a fini a lui manifesti”. Ibid, 89.

<sup>59</sup> “Per il che si osserva che ove sono dimorati gli Hebrei vi fiori il traffico et il negotio, come Livorno ne può fare attestazione. E la città di Venetia giamai porrà in oblio la memoria del primo inventore della scala di Spalatro, che fu hebreo di natione, che con suoi raccordi trasportò il negotio di gran parte di Levante in la città, giudicata hora detta scala il più fermo, e solido fondamento di traffico ch’habbia la città, prevalendo tale inviamiento agli altri, quanto molto più stabile, e meno esposta all’ingiurie della fortuna è la terra che il mare”. Ibid, 18.



European Jews tend to trade to the East, because in addition to the profitability of the direction itself, most of the "Jewish nation" lives in the East: 'But Jews are driven either by the need to survive, or by the fact that other Jews live in Turkish lands - moreover, most of their nation lives there. Therefore, they dare to personally travel abroad and invest their money and property in these places'<sup>60</sup>. Thus, one can infer that Luzzatto instrumentalized the Jewish past in order to protect his "nazione" from expulsion, to legitimize its presence in the Venetian Republic as "legs" of the state, and to secure additional privileges.

Seemingly, Luzzatto frames the historical path of the Venetian Jews into the context of the history of the Venetian Republic and offers a glance at the Hebrews within the paradigm of the Venetian history, especially in the history of trade. However, here Luzzatto is purely instrumental. The Hebrews in his treaty are an entity spread all over the world and detached from the local political projects (as we mentioned, Luzzatto called Jews "strangers as always"). Thus, he both represents him in the Venetian and world / universal perspective.

Despite the fact that Luzzatto constructed in his narrative the idea of enlightening the Jews, he did not forget about the Old Testament. He introduced into his text a topos (that was referred to Deuteronomy 26:8) typical for self-interpretation of Jews, which made it possible not to apply the forces of nature and history to "nazione"<sup>61</sup>. In such a case, he agreed that God had been guiding the Jewish people in an exclusive manner. With this passage the rabbi was trying to ideologically unite the scattered parts of one "nazione" into one in the sense of generating new knowledge and arts. Moreover, he emphasized that despite the dispersion, the Jews were united in both their doctrines and dogmas: "The opinions and doctrines of all this nation, so divided, torn and dismembered, are equal, and the ceremonial rites are the same, but in some non-essential things they are little different"<sup>62</sup>. Nevertheless, we should not forget the language barrier. Only Jews who spoke the volgare could read Luzzatto's treatise.

However, this should not be a problem if Luzzatto can agree for his entire "nazione" with the Venetian authorities to lift restrictions on free trade. It should not be forgotten that the three main synagogues in the Venetian ghetto were centers for the upbringing and education of Jews. Luzzatto could tell them about his idea of uniting "nazione" into a whole nation through the creation of new

---

<sup>60</sup> "Ma gli Hebrei o spinti dalla necessità del vivere, ovvero havendo altri Hebrei, anzi la maggior portione della loro nazione suddita al Turcho, arditamente vi capitano con le persone, e vi rimettono le loro facultà, et haveri". Ibid, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Amos Funkenstein, "The Dialectics of Assimilation," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 2 (1995): 1-14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4467441>.

<sup>62</sup> "L'opinioni, e dogmi di tutta questa nazione così divisa, dilaniata, e smembrata sono uniformi, li riti cerimoniali sono l'istessi, in alcune cose non essenziali poco dissimili". Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei*, 91.

arts and knowledge. Jewish traders would simply have to convey this message to Jews from all over the world (especially the Jews of the Ottoman Empire).

As Barzilay noted<sup>63</sup>, Luzzatto's ideas made their way to England in the works of English essayist and politician Joseph Addison, Portuguese rabbi-kabbalist and founder of the first Hebrew printing press Menasseh Ben Israel that wrote a pamphlet to Oliver Cromwell. It was not only in England that the Rabbi's Discourse was known. In addition to "Lettres persanes" of Montesquieu, Barzilay points to the "Adretea" of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder. In addition to Barzilay's words, one can recall his "This Too a Philosophy of History". In the section on the Middle Ages, he criticizes the Crusades as a loss-making company that was caused by chivalry. The least also promotes delusion and ignorance among the inhabitants of Western civilization. He believes that instead of the crusades, western civilizations could establish relations with the Arab world through mutually beneficial trade relations. Taking into account the direct references to Luzzatto in "Adretea", we can assume that the aforementioned thesis was also inspired by the rabbi.

However, most of all Luzzatto's ideas influenced the Irish philosopher John Toland, who anonymously published "Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland". In his short treatise he outlined to the English authorities why it is vital to rehabilitate the Jew's "natione" in Great Britain. Needless to say that John Toland took all his arguments from Semione Luzzatto's "Discourse". Thus, it turns out that Luzzatto's ideas (as well as the whole treatise) did not have to wait long for their time: after about sixty years they were already heard by the intellectuals of the nascent Enlightenment.

Therefore, as we argue, Luzzatto's "Discourse" should be placed in a broader context of the emerging Haskalah (or probably, to put it in a safer way, proto-Haskalah) movement. According to David Ruderman, «the Haskalah as primarily a political, pedagogic, and programmatic movement committed to transforming Ashkenazi Jewish culture... <...> the real pioneers of the Haskalah were those offering a political agenda of Jewish modernization». Supposedly, one can see the origins of the Haskalah already in the seventeenth century, and it is quite possible that Simone Luzzatto and his followers from his family and beyond it can be seen as forerunners of the Haskalah, who had a strong influence on the Jewry all over the world.

---

<sup>63</sup> Isaac E. Barzilay, "John Toland's Borrowings from Simone Luzzatto: Luzzatto's Discourse on the Jews of Venice (1638) the Major Source of Toland's Writing on the Naturalization of the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland (1714)." *Jewish Social Studies* 31, no. 2 (1969): 75–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4466483>.

Before Luzzatto, the Jewish intellectuals hardly ever wrote in volgare, whereas Luzzatto did it loud and admonished the Christian Europeans to change their attitude towards Jews, and at the same time admonished the Jews to think about their miserable condition, of which they themselves were partly to be blamed. At the same time, Luzzatto wrote that the enslaved condition did not necessarily impede mental improvement, vice versa, it could even contribute to it, if the Jews did not lose virtue and receptivity to knowledge and reflect: however, he stressed that the culture of the contemporary Jews had been stagnating and that unless any improvement was made, it could perish.

## Conclusion

In “Discourse” Luzzatto constructed the identity of the Venetian Jews. We argue that the rabbi was not only trying to maintain the status quo for the Jews, as Ravid and Lang say, but he wanted to show how the skills of the "nation" can be used for the prosperity of the Venetian Republic. If previously the Venetian authorities did not know what to do with them and how to call them apart from the “nation”, then the rabbi proposed to the authorities a project, according to which the Jews were given a significant place in the body of the Republic. If previously the Venetian authorities were more likely to agree with the *cittadini* and clergy about the expulsion of Jews from Venice, now they should have seen how their abilities could have been used for the benefit of the “public affair” in the meaning of *politeia* or reciprocal relations of a balanced type. The authorities would have seen how to derive mercantile benefits from relations with Jews for the entire Republic. In this case, Luzzatto spoke to the Venetian authorities on behalf of the entire Jewish community of the Venetian ghetto as the apologete of the “nation”<sup>64</sup>.

The second part of Luzzatto's treatise turned out to be the least studied in academia. Despite the popularity of the Venetian rabbi's text among modern specialists, none of them analyzed the “languages for description” of past and antiquity. We assume that in Luzzatto’s “Discourse” one can find temporal distinguishment between the “present time” (*tempo presente*) and “our time” (*tempi nostri*); the rabbi also refers to the past (*tempo passato*), which rather means the recent past and not the antiquity, whereas antiquity as such is mentioned as well (*antichità* and an adverb *anticamente*). Speaking about antiquity, Luzzatto uses different linguistic tools. He often refers to the ‘same time,’ in some cases probably in order to stress simultaneity; also one finds in the text ‘mean time’ and “several time”. The *antichità* of Luzzatto is divided into three parts: firstly, times of prosperity of the Jewish nation, secondly, times of prosperity of Ancient Greece, thirdly, times of expansion of the Roman Empire. Antiquity, apparently, ended after the Jewish nation was "conquered" by the Roman Empire, which resulted in the loss of its former greatness and the division of the people into many parts. Thus, there is a clear boundary of antiquity. After antiquity, the time of "long and miserable scattering" (“lunga e miserabile dispersione”) begins, i.e. the past time (also continuing in the present), when the Jewish nation is oppressed, evicted, killed, belittled, etc.

---

<sup>64</sup> Walter Pohl mentioned Josephus Flavius as a spokesman for the Jews and a defender of knowledge. In this, Luzzatto is similar to him and it is possible that he is likened to a philosopher. Ibid, 22.

Therefore, Luzzatto's treatise is addressed not only to the Venetian Doges and the whole population of Venice, but also to the Jewish nation itself, which must maintain its identity and move towards the accumulation and production of new knowledge. Antiquity is used by Luzzatto to instruct an entire people. It was important for him to reconstruct a lost state of greatness to which one must strive, a balance between the two models, the Roman one and the Greek one. For Luzzatto, the past of the Hebrew nation is most intimately connected to the contemporary state of the Jews, and the latter is constantly explained through the former, which is easily explained by his political agenda. The past of the Jews is dealt with from the Old Testament history to the Luzzatto's times. Some of the Luzzatto's discursive strategies follow the skeptical trends of his époque: skepticism regarding certain epistemological criteria, interest in the classical writings of the Skeptical school<sup>65</sup>, as well as biblical critical reading, which was emerging in the Protestant circles.

---

<sup>65</sup> D.B. Ruderman, 'Science and skepticism: Simone Luzzatto on perceiving the natural world,' in D.B. Ruderman, *Jewish thought and scientific discovery in early modern Europe* (New Haven and London, 1995), 153-184.

## Bibliography

### Primary sources

Botero, Giovanni. *Della ragione di stato, libri dieci. Di Giovanni Botero Benese, revisti dall'autore, e arricchiti in più luoghi di discorsi, e di cose memorabili etc.* Roma: presso Vincenzio Pellagallo, 1590.

Luzzatto, Simone. *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particolar dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia.* Venezia: Gioanne Calleoni, 1638.

Luzzatto, Simone. "Discourse On The State Of The Jews And In Particular Those Dwelling In The Illustrious City Of Venice." In *Discourse on the State of the Jews: Bilingual Edition* edited by Giuseppe Veltri and Anna Lissa, 3-242. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110527988-002>

Publius Cornelius Tacitus. *Historiarum libri.* Ed. Ch. Fisher. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910.

### Research literature

Bachi, Ricardo. "Saggio sul "Discorso" di Simone Luzzatto sulle condizioni degli ebrei nella diaspora," in R. Bachi, *Israele disperso e ricostruito: pagine di storia ed economia.* Roma, 1952. 97–139.

Barzilay, Isaac E. "John Toland's Borrowings from Simone Luzzatto: Luzzatto's Discourse on the Jews of Venice (1638) the Major Source of Toland's Writing on the Naturalization of the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland (1714)." In *Jewish Social Studies* 31, no. 2 (1969): 75–81.

Bonfil, Robert. "Changing mentalities of Italian Jews between the periods of the Renaissance and the Baroque," in *Italia* 11 (1994): 61–79.

Camarda, Chiara. *Tracing the Hebrew Book Collection of the Venice Ghetto* (doctoral thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2016 - 2017).

*Early Modern Culture and Haskalah – Reconsidering the Borderlines of Modern Jewish History* / edited by D. B. Ruderman and S. Feiner. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007.

Funkenstein, Amos. "The Dialectics of Assimilation." *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 2 (1995): 1–14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4467441>.

*Gli Ebrei e Venezia. Secoli XIV-XVIII.* Atti del Convegno, Venezia, 1983, ed. G. Cozzi. Milan, 1987.

Lang, Ariella. "The Double Edge of Irony in Simone Luzzatto's Discorso," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 15, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2009): 114–133.

- “Luzzatto (Luzzatti) Family,” Jewishencyclopedia.Com, 2021.  
<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10203-luzzatto-luzzatti#anchor1>.
- Malamhed, Abraham. “Simone Luzzatto on Tacitus: apologetica e ragione di Stato,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish history and literature*, ed. I. Twerski, 2. Cambridge, MA, 1984. 143–170.
- Pohl, Walter. *Historiography and Identity: Methodological Perspectives // Historiography and Identity I: Ancient and Early Christian Narratives of Community* / W. Pohl and V. Wieser, Turnhout: Brepols, 2019. 7-50.
- Ravid, Benjamin. “Between the Myth of Venice and the Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History: The Case of the Jews of Venice,” in Bernard Cooperman and Barbara Garvin, eds., *The Jews of Italy: Memory and Identity*. Bethesda, MD: University of Maryland Press, 2000. 151–192.
- Ravid, Benjamin. *Economics and toleration in seventeenth century Venice: the background and context of the Discorso of Simone Luzzatto*. Jerusalem, 1978.
- Ravid, Benjamin. The Venetian Context in Discourse. In *Simone Luzzatto, Discourse on the State of the Jews: Bilingual Edition*, transl. and ed. Giuseppe Veltri and Anna Lissa. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019. 243–274.
- Ravid, Benjamin. “Venice and its Minorities.” In *A Companion to Venetian History, 1400–1797*. / edited by E. R. Dursteler. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Roth, Cecil. *Gli ebrei in Venezia*. Roma, 1933.
- Ruderman, David. “Science and skepticism: Simone Luzzatto on perceiving the natural world,” in D.B. Ruderman, *Jewish thought and scientific discovery in early modern Europe*. New Haven and London, 1995. 153–184.
- Ruderman, David, and Shmuel Feiner. *Early modern culture and Haskalah*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007.
- Septimus, Bernard. “Biblical religion and political rationality in Simone Luzzatto, Maimonides and Spinoza,” in *Jewish thought in the seventeenth century*, ed. I. Tversky, B. Septimus. Cambridge, MA, 1987. 399–443.
- Trivellato, Francesca. *The Promise and Peril of Credit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.
- Veltri, Giuseppe, Miletto Gianfranco, and Guido Bartolucci. “The Last Will and Testament of Simone Luzzatto (1583?–1663) and the Only Known Manuscript of the Discorso (1638).” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 5(1):125-146

## **Contact details and disclaimer:**

Evgeny A. Khvalkov

National Research University Higher School of Economics (Saint Petersburg, Russia). Department of History, Associate Professor; [ekhvalkov@hse.ru](mailto:ekhvalkov@hse.ru)

**Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE.**

© Khvalkov, Shkil, Afanasieva 2021.