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The Jewish Community in Rome: 2100 years of history and beyond

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(Translated by Murray Watson)

The first documented references to the existence of a Jewish community in Rome date back to the second century before the Common Era—which is to say, more than twenty-one centuries ago. Since that time, Rome’s Jewish community has enjoyed a continuous and uninterrupted presence, which makes it unique among all the Western communities, in that it has survived for such a long period of time without interruption—even when, during the 16th and 17th centuries, there were very few Jews who were allowed to live in Western Europe. But it is not the fact of its continuity (which is significant and important, in and of itself) which accounts for the unique character of the Roman community, and for the somewhat specific and particular role which it had assumed in the Western Diaspora, and in Italy in particular. Its importance is, rather, rooted in the fact that it is situated at the centre of Christianity, in the heart of the papacy, face-to-face with a Church whose denial it symbolized while, In the eyes of that Church, [the Jewish community] was simultaneously a sign of a theologically motivated presence within the Christian way of speaking about salvation.

But the Roman Jewish community did not suddenly take on that role, and did not immediately become (until the end of the first millennium) the embodiment of the blinded and prostrate Synagogue which was depicted at the main doors of medieval cathedrals. For this transformation to occur, we would have to wait until the changes which took place in the Church, and in Christian society, beginning in the 12th and 13th centuries. Up until that point, the Roman community was not distinguishable from the other forms of Jewish presence in Italy and the West. The Church’s gaze had not yet focussed in on that one presence, to make it into a symbol of different-ness.

It isn’t only a question of Christian anti-Judaism, which had been gaining strength since the massacres during the First Crusade, and even more so after the 1300s. What makes this presence even more laden with religious meaning is the process (with both negative and positive aspects) which had accompanied the growth of the Church of Rome. As the Church gradually consolidated its structure, it also honed its *legal* tools with the building-up of canon law, its *cultural* tools with Scholasticism and universities, and its *judicial* tools with the Inquisition. The presence of a form of different-ness that was accepted, and yet subordinated, was seen as essential, and was bound up with that in a thousand different ways. After the end of the Avignon Captivity, the Roman Jewish community became, from that point onward, the counter-point to the universality of the Church—negatively, as a form of different-ness that was disdained and trodden underfoot; positively, as a presence that was necessary to the economy of salvation, In both of its meanings: as a different-ness against which to measure and define oneself. The creation of the ghetto in the mid-1500s represents the culmination of that process. Paolo Prodi spoke of the Supreme Pontiff in his book *Il sovrano Pontefice: Un corpo e due anime: la monarchia papale nella prima età moderna*), defining the twofold nature of the papacy, as head

of the Church and as ruler of the Papal States. The papacy would be judged by the presence of Jews in Rome on both of these levels: the [Jewish] community living alongside the city (a process that even the construction of the ghetto could not bring an end to), while the Church would judge itself theologically vis-à-vis the Jews, making use of them and placing them within its own theological framework, alternating between a disdain for their different-ness, and toleration of it.

The undeniable significance of the oldest community in the Western Diaspora derives, therefore, from the Church. It is the presence of the Church which made the Jews of Rome exceptional, even within the general context of Western Europe (which was itself entirely Christian). Held hostage by the Church, the community provided a backdrop to the Church's own self-affirmation. It impacted its politics, gave an inflection to its tone, like an orchestra playing in the background. Can we imagine Rome, the Rome of the Popes, without Jews, Rome's most ancient citizens? If its relationship to the Church plays a decisive role in the nature of the community, then the community's relationship to the Church, by the very fact of its existence, plays no less of a role in terms of the nature of the Church. Even despite its teaching of contempt, the Church of Rome accepted the presence of this different-ness, the only community to be granted such a status.

Let us start off by offering a quick overview of the community of Rome, in its relationship to Rome, beginning with the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Before that time, its presence was not really emphasized. We could say, however, that that Council introduced, at least potentially, a historic shift in the relationship between Jews and Christians, even if the only noteworthy innovation was the wearing of a distinctive marking (which differed from place to place). The emphasis on the Jews took on greater importance in the period between the 1200s and 1400s, paralleling the major transformations which were taking place in the Church. The papacy's move to Avignon marginalized the Jews of Rome, who were henceforth deprived of a papacy for whom they could act as a foil—but it accentuated the presence of the Jews of Avignon, underscoring how much the prominence of the Jewish presence derived from the papacy. It was, in fact, a French pope, John XXII, who would, for the first time ever, decide to expel the Jews from the papal seat of power. After the return to Rome, and the rebuilding of the city as the centre of the papacy, the Roman community began to re-emerge from its tranquil, anonymous status. Expulsions—first in France, and then in Spain—raised the Jewish question. Spain proposed a model according to which there would be no more Jews nor, as a consequence, any conversions. After a considerable struggle, Rome eventually rejected that model. Those years of uncertainty (which were also the years of the religious fracturing of Christianity) were defining moments when, at the very time that their presence was being reaffirmed, the Jews of Rome were being transformed into a prominent symbol in the economy of salvation, on account of the burden of a new and unheard-of proselytizing effort, which grew with the return of an apocalyptic mood. The Roman community would eventually see itself enclosed in the ghetto, both to signify its importance and to highlight its subordinate status. From that point onward, there was no more talk of expulsions but, rather, of expulsion within the ghetto, inside the Christian world which surrounded it. Unlike the other kingdoms which had chased out their Jews, in Rome there were still baptismal fonts for their conversion.

Within this enclosure for the Jews—which was opened at dawn and closed at dusk—the world inside it, and the world outside it, came to know each other close-up. As Kenneth Stow has recently emphasized (*Il ghetto di Roma nel Cinquecento: Storia di un'acculturazione*), the Jews

adapted Christian customs and norms, and even Christian laws, for their own purposes, in a kind of selective inculturation, which chose and adapted the tools of the external world, such as in the case of the *jus Kazachà*. Christians believed that it was only the Jews who were being integrated, without an awareness of how even the presence of a community of “others” would end up by changing their world also, obliging them to confront different-ness, and see in it their own reflection. There were cultural and social similarities, and intellectual curiosity, even if perhaps in Rome these were less of this than in the other ghettos.

Gradually, however, as the ghetto became a venerable part of the city, it almost seems that the inhabitants of Rome found themselves situated in a second, larger ghetto, surrounding the first. Both the Jews and the non-Jews were closed in. Even the times they lived through were the same: the Roman community’s crisis after the closing of the banks in 1682 paralleled Rome in the 1700s: a closed, provincial city. To use Croce’s expression, it was one type of decline linked to another type of decline. As Della Pergola has pointed out, it was as if, by setting them apart in the ghetto, the popes had increased (rather than decreased) the similarities between Jews and Christians in Rome.

The Enlightenment was a difficult period for Rome’s Jews, bound up in an ambivalently symbiotic relationship with the Christian world, while the Church was moving toward a growing isolation, and European and Italian society were becoming increasingly secularized. In that context, the Jews of the Roman community—who had always been “the others” *par excellence* in the eyes of the Church—ended up taking on more and more clearly the character of “outsiders,” and were lumped in together with the hated “innovators” (although they were actually far-removed from them). In 1774, as the Enlightenment was fully flowering, the popes proclaimed an edict that was one of the harshest and most restrictive in the long history of the relationship between Jews and Rome. Forced conversions of minors increased, as did the separation between Roman Jewish society and the rest of Italian society, and that between the Papal States and Europe. A grave crisis began between the Jewish world and the Church, which would change relations between those two worlds. To use an expression of Pius XI from 1871, it would change “children” into “dogs barking in the streets,” and it would finally break the umbilical-cord relationship which had existed for centuries between the Church and the Jews of Rome. It would take almost another century, marked by moments of change (revolution, the Napoleonic conquest, emancipation under Napoleon), and by steps that harkened back to the past (such as the renewed closure of the ghetto, and the renewal of forcing Jews to listen to sermons)—right up to the conquest of Rome, the loss of the popes’ temporal power, and Pius IX’s enclosing himself in the ghetto of the Vatican. Judging from the language used by the Church at that time, one might think that all of the soldiers at the Porta Pia were Jews, and not only the one officer, Giacomo Segre, who was in charge of the sharpshooters ... that the new Italy was solely the work of Jewish upstarts. Over the next thirty years, the rupture between Italy and its Jews reached its historical high point. This was what historians refer to as the age of Catholic anti-Semitism—the era of the reappearance of the blood libel, and of accusations against Jews which were the harshest in the long history of the teaching of contempt. It was only at the start of the new century, with the arrival of Pius X and the softening of the “*non expedit*”—when the papacy itself left its own ghetto—that relations began to improve or, more accurately, took on a new sense of balance.

The Roman community left the ghetto weighed down by the effects of its lengthy segregation and underdevelopment. There was a social gulf between the Jewish bourgeoisie (often not of

Roman origin) and a sub-proletariat made up of wandering vendors and small shopkeepers, who were still linked to older ways of relating to what was still considered as the outside world. The upper social classes were Fascist, and the leaders of the community were members of the PNF [National Fascist Party] until 1938; even after that, they worked closely with the regime. This was not the case in the area of the ghetto, which was considered anti-Fascist, and which was often the site of minor skirmishes between sides.

In terms of the Church (which had since made its peace with Italy, by means of the 1929 Concordat), there was nothing new in terms of its relationship to the Jews. The old anti-Judaism continued on, more or less unchanged, more or less meaningful, at the same time that the Church was very clearly rejecting the new “racism of blood”. There were few exceptions, although one that was important was that of Father Gemelli who, in 1938, became seriously drawn to the idea of biological racism, and only an intervention by the Holy Office in January of 1939 managed to pull him back from the brink of the racist precipice. There was, however, an aspect that I would like to emphasize, since it seems to me that it has not received the attention it deserves from the field of historiography: the new role that conversions came to play in the context of the encounter with racial anti-Semitism. Conversions—which the Fascists closest to Nazi Germany (like Giovanni Preziosi) saw as Judaism’s “Trojan Horse” in an “Arian” society—became suspect, the fruit of a type of Pietism toward the Jews.

Moreover, we do not know how many of those 1938 conversions were real, and how many were false. For example, were the baptisms that Cardinal Schuster conferred in Milan’s Duomo at the start of this period (which were denounced by *La Vita Italiana*, Preziosi’s newspaper) real baptisms, or simply the registering of sacraments that had never occurred? This calling into question of the very idea of conversion (which recalls Spain in the 15th and 16th centuries) could not *not* have had an impact on relations between the two worlds.

This was the situation when, in September 1943, the Nazis occupied Rome. After the roundup of October 16th, the hunt for the Jews began, largely undertaken by Italian Fascists. As is already well known, thousands of Jews found refuge in parishes, churches and religious institutions. What led up to this situation, which was something entirely new, and conditioned by the circumstances of the relations between those two worlds? How did Jews and Catholics perceive it?

For Catholics, the impetus to open the doors of religious institutions came simultaneously from below (as a consequence of the outrage provoked by the roundup of October 16th) and from above (with requests from the Curia to open their doors to Jews and other people under threat). Historians continue to discuss whether there was an actual order issued by Pius XII; I am personally convinced of what Andrea Riccardi has put forward (in his *L’inverno più lungo*): that welcoming people on such a scale could not have been granted without such an order. But what is of greater interest to me here is how this kind of welcome was perceived. I believe that the decision to offer this welcome was a choice. We know, in fact, that there were voices raised in the Curia opposing such a welcome (it is possible, and even likely, that there were people in the background quietly spreading the idea that it was not worth taking risks on behalf of Christ’s enemies, but this is difficult to verify). On the other hand—on the Jewish side—having recourse to ecclesiastical hospitality seems to be the outcome of a situation of such serious need that it could not be turned down. The older umbilical-cord relationship between Rome’s Jews and the Church still seemed to be very solid. The only Jews who regarded convents with hesitation were

those who feared being placed in a situation where they might be called upon to convert (a request that, as we know, generally did not occur). In general, these were the Jews who, for reasons of religious observance, had had minimal relations with Christians, or minimal curiosity concerning them. Whatever the case may have been, the choice on the part of the Church to offer this welcome did not bring about a transformation of the ancient teaching of contempt (although it may have had an effect on daily relations within those convents) and, from the Jewish side, reflected a return to the old idea of the Church as protector. During the long months of the Occupation (as Riccardi highlights), a change can be seen in relations between Jews and Catholics—particularly between Jews and the clergy (priests and sisters) that the Jews had never gotten to know up close: attentiveness, long conversations on religious topics, curiosity. The forced living-together during 1943 and 1944 was laying the foundations for a new approach.

The fact that this change did not bear fruit immediately is, in my view, due to two factors: on the Catholic side, the older anti-Judaism reasserted itself after the war, without those events calling into question the teaching of contempt (as Jules Isaac had hoped). On the Jewish side, the gratitude shown by the Jews after Liberation toward the Catholics who had helped them was tainted by an event that, for the Jews of Rome, represented a major trauma: the baptism of Rome's Chief Rabbi, Israel Zolli. It is an episode that still deserves to be studied—not so much in and of itself, but in terms of relations between Catholic and Jews (and it is, for Roman Jews most of all, still a subject to be explored). We can suspect that it would have had a very powerful impact in deepening the gulf between Roman Jews and the Church under Pius XII.

In terms of what remains—the Council and the declaration *Nostra Aetate*—this is the history that we are here to recall, at a distance of fifty years. It is a history that is also open to the future, because *Nostra Aetate* provided both the opportunity and the incentive for a theological re-examination of relations between these two worlds. It isn't simply about acknowledgement, or respect, or even the implicit rejection of the need for a mission to the Jews (which was a most important step to take, and a difficult one), but of digging deeply, right down to the roots of the split between Judaism and Christianity. Already in the 30s, Christian and Jewish scholars had been developing their studies regarding the Jewishness of Jesus, an area about which Rabbi Zolli was an authoritative spokesperson. And the fact that he felt the need for baptism—perhaps in order to be able to continue those studies—tells us how difficult the *Shoah* had made them. Let us set out once more from that point, as I believe we can. Perhaps it is to that perspective that the future belongs.