

Rabbis and Rabbinic Culture in Italy in the Twentieth Century

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From *Morenu ha-Rav* (“Our Master, the Rabbi”) and *Mará de-atrà* (the community Rabbi [literally: “Master of the Locale”]) to Chief Rabbi: Roles and Functions of the Rabbinate

The role of the rabbi has evolved considerably in the contemporary world. Rabbinical customs and functions vary according to time and (space) [place] and have taken on diverse characteristics in the course of history, adapting each time to the necessity of seeking new models of identity and the dynamics of assimilation and integration of the Jewish minority into civil society. Through a process started with its emancipation, Italian Judaism began to be limited only to its religious worship and practices, imitating the model of the predominant religion under the pressure of secular and modern ideas. As a consequence of this process, (also) the internal organisation of the communities, as well as the Jews’ relationship with society changed drastically. This led to the emergence of new needs and challenges aimed at determining a new Jewish identity that could be in line with the newly obtained national identity. From a structure based on separate organisations with the cultural and social systems, only partially autonomous, which were common in the ghetto era – when values and dynamics of control gave the rabbi of a community a role of extreme importance in society – Jewish communities adopted a new model based on the integration of their people into civil society, often followed by the progressive widespread abandonment of traditional Jewish customs by specific individuals. Inevitably, this change also impacted the figure of the rabbi in the community.

During the ghetto period, the *rav* (rabbi, a noun derived from the adjective *rav* meaning ‘very’, wise and proficient), called in the past *Morenu ha-Rav* (“our teacher, the rabbi”), the *Teacher* par excellence and the head of the local rabbinical school or the *Talmud Torah*, was also called the *mará de-atrà*, the ‘Master of the Locale’: the *judge*, the only one with the competence to interpret the Law (Halakhah), who provided advice on personal matters and enforced judgements in the context of a rabbinical court. The local rabbi had absolute juridical and moral authority in his community. Following the closing of the ghettos and the progressive integration, the role of the rabbi started to become completely different and more varied, with a position of spiritual leader. As a consequence of the cultural and identity issues which arose after the unification of Italy, it was necessary to redefine the rabbinical role: the rabbi became a spiritual guide who provided pastoral counselling, ensuring that the norms of the *Torah* did not overlap with the rules of civil society. A preacher and the holder of Jewish culture and customs often abandoned or, however, followed only within the family context or in the synagogue. Responsible for teaching Judaism to an audience with little familiarity with Jewish studies (unlike in the past), he was a preacher, a religious leader, and a guide who represented the community, often in contrast with secular authorities.

Dante Lattes, essayist, publicist and professor of Jewish literature, when graduating as a rabbi from the Rabbinical College of Livorno, pointed out the limits of the Italian rabbinical system of the time:

Rabbis have wilfully decided to completely disregard the new discoveries of science and the development of new civilisations; they are contemptuous and proud only of their old role; or have given too much significance to these new ideas. [...] Today, as the role of the Rabbi becomes increasingly complex and takes on a broader meaning, it must be accompanied with proper training and a modern education; not those modern ideas which aim to corrupt tradition, but the ones which can strengthen it and give it new life; [...] In some countries, the 20th century shall mark an era of renewal in the rabbinical institution and in the history of Judaism (“*Il Corriere Israelitico*”, XXXVI, 1898, p. 223).

In the opinion of Lattes, greatly inspired by his master Elia Benamozegh, it was necessary to restore dignity to the role of the rabbi, raising its social and moral status, often regarded by community councils as a second-class employee, whose function was merely to be a religious teacher. The decline of his role and image had to be tackled in many ways, in particular by designing new educational systems and providing proper education to the new generations of rabbis. These ideas were not something new. The necessity to form a new rabbinical class had already been discussed by the Rabbinical Institute of Israelis of the Lombard-Venetian Kingdom of Padua, founded in 1829 and active until 1872, with the aim to provide young students with extensive knowledge of traditional Jewish culture, as well as a solid grounding in general culture. The institute closed down after the unification of Italy because of a lack of funding and the general disinterest of its members following the death of two of the most prominent teachers, Samuel David Luzzatto and Lelio Della Torre. It was reopened in Rome in 1887 under the name of Italian Rabbinical College, but the particularly unsatisfactory results caused its closure in 1898 until Samuel Hirsch Margulies, Chief Rabbi of Florence asked that (it was) [be] passed under his direction.

Rabbinical Education: the Italian Rabbinical College in Florence (1899-1932), in Rome (1933 to date) and the Rabbinical College of Livorno (1900-1955)

Margulies was a charismatic man, driven by remarkable fortitude. He had devoted all his energies to the promotion of education as the main way of tackling the uncontrollable assimilation in Italy and approaching young people to the study and observance of the *Torah*. Possessing extensive knowledge of Jewish and general culture, in a short time, Margulies, who was a Zionist,



1. Dario Treves, *Portrait of Rabbi Dario Disegni*, 1964. Jewish Community of Turin

turned the community of Florence into the centre of Jewish culture in Italy and the symbol of the Jewish-Italian resurgence of the early 20th century. Thanks to his remarkable feats, Margulies, along with the other teachers of the rabbinical college (Peretz Chajes and Ismar Elbogen) and its many students (Raffaello Della Pergola, Umberto Cassuto, Elia Samuele Artom, Ermanno Friedenthal, Dario Disegni, Gustavo Castelbolognesi, Angelo Sacerdoti, David Prato and Alfonso Pacifici, just to name the most famous ones) contributed to creating a renewed individual and collective Jewish identity. This identity was inspired directly from classical Jewish sources and aimed to redefine the role and purpose of the Jewish ruling class in Italy through the study and observance of the *mitsvot* (precepts), but also through militancy in political Zionism.

The Rabbinical college of Florence had a crucial role in the creation of the new rabbinical national system and contributed with the help of its teachers, collaborators and students to shaping a large part of the Italian Jewish cultural elite of the next generations, engaging in a process of continuous religious modernization and national integration.

The Florentine Rabbinical college, as the spiritual continuation of the Rabbinical Institute of Padua, adopted the educational models of the rabbinical seminaries of Breslau and Vienna – where Margulies and Chajes had had their education – becoming the main source of dissemination of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Italy. The curriculum of the Rabbinical college of Florence, and also the one in Rome until the end of the 20th century accompanied the main traditional Jewish subjects with the study of a wide range of historical, philosophical, literary and linguistic subjects, with particular attention to the study of the Bible using traditional and historical-critical methods, often at the expense of the study of the Talmud. It will not come as a surprise then that the Italian Rabbinical College boasts a number of internationally renowned scholars among its graduates (U. Cassuto, E.S. Artom, I. Sonne, D. Diringler, and R. Bonfil, just to name a few), but no experts in the field of Talmudic studies. The reasons are many and rooted in the past, dating back to the time of the Talmud burnings in Italy in the 16th century and the enactment of laws which forbade the printing and possession of Talmudic books, in force until the opening of the ghettos. The historical-scientific approach to the study of Jewish subjects adopted by the Rabbinical college played a central role in the training of entire generations of Italian rabbis. Another peculiarity of the institute was the mandatory study of humanities in high school classes and university courses and so, holding a public degree was a compulsory requirement for a higher rabbinical degree (this requirement would be abolished only in 1950), as well as the possession of good oratorical skills.

After Margulies' death in 1922, the Rabbinical college went into decline until 1933 when it was reopened in Rome on request of the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Angelo Sacerdoti, concomitantly with the transfer of Umberto Cassuto to La Sapienza University. The college's curriculum mostly remained the same except for some minor changes made in 1927 by Artom and Cassuto, who further reduced the study of Talmudic subjects. The college was directed by Angelo Sacerdoti (1933-1935), Elia Samuele Artom (1935-1937), David Prato (1937-1938 and 1945-1951), and Italo Zolli (1939-1943, no academic degrees were issued in those years). After Prato's death, the Rabbinical college was temporarily moved to Turin under the leadership of Rabbi Dario Disegni (1952-1955); finally, it was moved back to Rome where it is still located today and entrusted to the direction of Alfredo Sabato Toaff (1955-1963), Elio Toaff (1963-1995), Giuseppe Laras (1995-1999) and Riccardo Di Segni (from 1999 to date).

The plans of the Italian Jewish leadership were to transform the Italian Rabbinical College, a national rabbinical institute, into the only centre of reference with regard to the conferral of rabbinical degrees and provision of Jewish education. For this reason, in the first decades of the 20th century, there were numerous attempts, all failed, to unify the Italian Rabbinical College

with the Rabbinical College of Livorno, another prominent rabbinical school where many renowned rabbis and teachers trained in the first half of the 20th century. Founded in 1863, the institute of Livorno owed its success primarily to its director Elia Benamozegh. A philosopher and a Kabbalist, Benamozegh changed the college's curriculum, focusing more on mystical and literary subjects and less on science compared to the Florentine Rabbinical college. The two colleges went through periods of great rivalry during the leadership of Samuele Colombo (1900-1923) and even more in the first phase of the direction of Alfredo Sabato Toaff (1923-1955) who were both chief rabbis of Livorno. At the end of an eight-year program of lower education and another four-year higher education program, the students of Livorno and Florence could apply for a public degree to have access to the higher rabbinical degree (*chakham ha-shalem*).

Rabbinical Conferences, Italian Rabbinical Federation, Military Rabbinate and Rabbinical Council

Since the early years after the unification of Italy, the Italian rabbinate felt the necessity to start a dialogue internally with the community with the aim to discuss religious and cultural issues of common interest in the context of their search for a new national organisational model. During the second half of the 19th century and in the first years of the following century, there were numerous attempts to convoke a national rabbinical synod to debate on urgent matters, take a common stance in the fight against cultural assimilation and devise measures to contrast the rampant custom of mixed marriages. However, despite the continuous appeals of the Committee for the Communities, it was not always possible to reach an agreement on the objectives and purposes of a single rabbinical association. An idea that was advanced on several occasions was to establish the office of Chief Rabbi of Italy that would be based in Rome and act as the representative of the entire Italian rabbinate, similar to the French or English model. This idea was proposed again during the First World War but was always rejected, harshly criticised by most rabbis. With the beginning of the war, there was a need for greater collaboration between the rabbis of Italy, also as logistical support for the military rabbinate promoted and organised by Angelo Sacerdoti. Established in June 1915, the military rabbinate was based on the model of the military vicariates introduced into the Italian army a couple of months earlier. Its purpose was to provide care and religious counselling for Jewish soldiers, offering comfort to the wounded and arranging services for the dead and on the occasion of religious festivals. Thanks to the establishment of the military rabbinate, Italian Jews could finally express their strong patriotic feelings and their gratitude to the monarchy, initiator of the Jewish emancipation, as well as to the newly formed country which supported the integration of Jews into civil society. So, the Italian Jewish population and the rabbis fighting in the army for them were able to fulfil their duty as citizens, serve their country with devotion and by doing so, also combat widespread anti-Semitic prejudices.

During the war, Angelo Sacerdoti dedicated his efforts to establishing the Italian Rabbinical Federation which would make it possible to deal with the problems of the communities more effectively, enhance the quality and number of religious services and in particular promote and disseminate Jewish education. Sacerdoti, like Lattes before him, was aware of the widespread discomfort for the decline in the popular image of the rabbi and the lack of cultural and ideological values among the Jews after the unification; he also recognised the inadequacy of the school system which should instead be the main tool for the dissemination of a new cultural model for the education of the Jewish people. Sacerdoti claimed that since “many and varied abilities and qualities are expected from the modern rabbi, so much so that even the best ones could not possibly meet the requirements of this position”, then the creation of a rabbinical federation would provide “mutual advantages”. As he said:



2. Rabbi David Prato during the demonstration at the Arch of Titus in Rome on the occasion of the UN decisions on Palestine, 2 December 1947. CDEC Foundation, Photo Library

Today, in addition to being a pious and educated man, a rabbi must also be an organiser, a good teacher, an energetic and inspiring leader, a diplomat, a speaker, and so forth. Trying to find such a man is like looking for a needle in a haystack ("Israel", 25.5.1916, p. 2).

The Federation was active from 1917 until 1922 when the Consortium of Communities decided to establish a rabbinical commission made up of three members which would have the task of convoking annual rabbinical conferences and monitoring the progress of schools. The law of 1930-1931 on Israeli Communities (Article 54) established the Rabbinical Council, also made up of three members elected by the congress and to be chosen among the five appointed chief rabbis. With the enactment of the agreements of 8 March 1989, the Italian Rabbinical Assembly appointed a group of five delegates and the Council of the Union selected three members among them.

Political Rabbis and Chief Rabbis of Italy

In the first twenty years of the 20th century, the involvement of Italian Jews in the political life of the country reached unforeseen levels and some of them even ended up holding high-ranking positions in the government. Just like the Jewish leaders, the rabbinate also had to deal with the political world without having any knowledge of the rules and dynamics of the management of power. During the 20th century, the rabbis of Rome, centre of the national political world, besides their innumerable tasks, also had to take on the role of unofficial representatives of Italian Judaism – almost like *de facto* chief rabbis of Italy – building close relations with the political world at different levels. This was a constant characteristic throughout the leadership of the three Tuscan rabbis who succeeded one another as the Chief Rabbi of Rome after the death of Vittorio Castiglioni (1911): Angelo Sacerdoti (1912-1935), David Prato (1937-1938, 1945-1951) and Elio Toaff (1951-2001); three men with considerable political acumen, sound diplomatic skills, and organisational, educational and oratorical skills without being scholars of Judaism.

This new era was inaugurated by Angelo Sacerdoti who, as a Zionist militant established relationships with the political world after building contacts among European Zionist federations and Zionist groups. Along with Rabbi Dante Lattes and Moshe Beilinson from the Italian Zionist Federation, he took on the difficult task of earning the support of the Italian government for promoting the Zionist cause. After the march on Rome, Sacerdoti and Lattes made careful arrangements for the meeting between Mussolini and Chaim Weizmann on 3 January 1923, meeting up with several representatives of the fascist party. Mussolini's objective was to weaken the hegemonic control of the British over the Middle East and assess what contribution Zionism could make in favour of the economic and cultural penetration of Italy in the eastern Mediterranean. In the following years, Sacerdoti had frequent meetings with Mussolini and other government officials, using the encounters as an opportunity to expand his field of action. During a meeting with Mussolini, Sacerdoti proposed establishing a federation of Sephardic communities and a central institution to conduct a pro-Italy propaganda campaign in the Mediterranean countries using the Jewish minorities in the colonies; at the same time, he did not miss out on the chance to denounce the anti-Semitic attacks occasionally published by the fascist press and, in 1933 to condemn Germany's racial policy. The rabbi of Rome showed great commitment to the issue of the regulation of the communities, also with the objective of restoring dignity to the figure of the rabbi and rabbinical schools. Sacerdoti was one of the advocates and creators of the 1930-1931 law which, although it provided for the establishment of an organisational, religious and legislative system for the Jewish communities, it also included the Union of Communities in the reorganisation of the fascist state, thus subjecting the Jewish minority to the control of the regime.

The positive contribution of Italian Judaism to international policy convinced the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs to support the choice of David Prato as Chief Rabbi of Alexandria in 1927. From his office in the Egyptian city, Rabbi Prato, a Zionist, was able to create a large network of diplomatic relationships with local national authorities, with the Zionist world, with international Jewish organisations, and with Italian politicians, arranging meetings with Minister Ciano and Mussolini on at least six occasions. Prato's actions also had the objective of bringing Judaism closer to the Catholic world and the Church. After his visit to the Vatican in March 1936 in support of the Polish Jews, Prato suggested strengthening the dialogue with the Holy See, considered a major political and moral force which could help avert the impending dangers that threatened European Jews.

The Fascists had contrasting opinions about the Zionist movement: on the one hand, they regarded it with suspicion as it was an international and democratic organisation with Sacerdoti and Prato as its representatives, but on the other hand they thought it could be advantageous for their Mediterranean policy. For a while, this did not affect the diplomatic work of the two rabbis of Rome, but eventually the relations between fascism and Judaism worsened to the point that Prato was forced to emigrate to Israel. In the post-war period, Prato could resume his political activities and the dialogue with the Vatican in a completely new scenario, thanks to the newly established State of Israel and the physical and moral reconstruction of the Jewish communities.

During his fifty years of rabbinate, Elio Toaff effectively improved the relations with the political world, keeping contacts with the government, local authorities and the Church. The rabbi built solid relationships with heads of government and presidents, championed the religious and working rights of the Jewish minority and accused the political world for the grave neo-fascist anti-Semitic demonstrations of the 1950s and 1960s, demanding prompt intervention of the authorities. On other occasions, he conducted diplomatic missions and mediation talks in times of great political tension such as the period following the Palestinian attack on the synagogue in Rome in 1982.

During the pontificate of Pope John XXIII and then after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Toaff built a solid network of relationships with high-ranking members of the church, promoting the necessity of dialogue between the religions. His actions would lead to the promulgation of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration after a long process of renewal that changed the Catholic attitude towards Judaism, with the condemnation of anti-Semitism, the rebuttal of the accusation of deicide and the recognition of Judaism as a religion of equal importance. In 1986, the relations between Judaism and the Catholic church – never simple and troubled by many setbacks and second thoughts – reached their culmination with the visit of John Paul II to the synagogue of Rome.

Second Half of the Twentieth Century

After the liberation, it became necessary to rebuild the Italian Jewish society, both physically and morally, reunite the communities shattered by ideological conflict and tragic loss, and re-organise the schools and the rabbinical college. Besides the most pressing problems, the rabbinate had to deal with issues relating to episodes of abjuration during the persecutions, the spiritual vacuum left by the deported rabbis and the restoration of religious and cultural services with the aim of defining a new Jewish collective sense of identity along with the reconstruction of Italy on democratic and republican values. The necessity to cope with the past and grief for the victims of the Holocaust was an important factor in the process of reconstruction of the identity of the Italian Jewish community. On 24 March 1946, recalled from Tel Aviv to lead the community of Rome for the second time and rebuild the Italian Rabbinical College after Italo Zolli's conversion to Christianity, noticing two memorial tombstones, Rabbi Prato said:

16 October 1943 – 23 March 1944: two disastrous dates with a tragic meaning in the life of our community as they have now become part of the history of the Jewish people [...]. We will never be able to forget these dates as they are forever engraved in our memory, but we wanted them to be engraved on stone as well. [...] But it is for those who did not know or did not share our anguish and our anxiety, not yet dissolved, that we wanted the memory of what happened to be carved on this sacred monument, which was erected during one of the brightest moments of freedom and democracy in Italy. [...] Do not abandon yourself to despair, to a feeling of refusal which can lead to scepticism, self-interest and materialism. On the contrary, I ask all of you to continue to believe in life and justice, despite everything (David Prato, *Dal Pergamo della Comunità di Roma*, Rome, 1950).

Prophetic messages, references to universal values of justice, peace and freedom and the ethical value of the *mitsvot* were recurrent themes in the post-war rabbinical sermons of Prato, Toaff, Paolo Nissim and Sergio J. Sierra – some of the most brilliant rabbis of Republican Italy.

In 1946, on the occasion of the first five titles of *Maskil* (a lower rabbinical degree) conferred after the end of the war, Prato wrote again about the universal value of peace:

Now you can finally understand how [...] to contribute [...] to spreading peace among men; and I mean all men, not just the Jews, so that you can be examples of a righteous life, purity,



3. The rabbinical body on the Tevè of the Synagogue in Rome during Chaim Weizmann's visit. In the photo, among others, Rabbi Sacerdoti and President Angelo Sereni. Rome, March 1922. In A. Piperno, *Come Eravamo per capire chi siamo*, Deputazione Ebraica di Assistenza e Servizio Sociale di Roma, 1999, p. 236

honesty of purpose and actions, sacrifice and in particular dedication to the religious faith you have chosen in your life" (David Prato, *Dal Pergamo della Comunità di Roma*, Rome 1950).

Thanks also to the contribution of foreign teachers, the college restarted its educational activities. In 1949-1950, Paolo Nissim, Meyer Haim Relles, Sergio J. Sierra and Nello Pavoncello were conferred the title of *chakham ha-shalem*. After their graduation, they were assigned to some vacant rabbinical positions. Subsequently, Pavoncello returned to Rome where he taught at the rabbinical college and in Jewish schools, supervising directly the training of students and rabbis.

The Italian Jewish community also celebrated the return of Dante Lattes who was appointed as director of the Department for Jewish Education and Culture of the Union. Lattes was the author of numerous publications on Judaism, the *Torah* and other biblical texts. The process of cultural dissemination was then continued by Augusto Segre and Scialom Bahbout and consolidated by Rabbi Menachem Emanuele Artom through the publication of history and geography books, grammar and the first modern Hebrew-Italian-Hebrew vocabulary. All these initiatives were followed by a project of translation of the Hebrew Bible curated by Dario Disegni with the contribution of various generations of rabbis, which would be completed in 1967.

Over time, the state of Israel and the central rabbinate became a point of reference for the sense of identity of the Italian Jews who had left the country. The role of Israel in the development of a sense of identity of the community intensified after the Six-Day War. The number of young students of the rabbinical college, who applied to a study abroad programme in Israel multiplied; this experience allowed them to learn about new cultures and learn modern Hebrew, an essential language for rabbinical communication. Israeli teachers were invited to teach at Italian rabbinical schools and more in general, the relationships with Israeli rabbinical authorities were strengthened. The identity, cultural and legal problems shared by all European Jews encouraged the exchange of opinions and better collaboration between European rabbis leading to the establishment in 1956 of the Conference of European Rabbis – a type of organisation which was a novelty at that time. The Conference started its activities the following year and even had the involvement of rabbis Toaff and Laras in the 1980s as active members of the executive.

In 1995, Giuseppe Laras, chief rabbi of Milan and then director of the rabbinical college of Rome signed an agreement with the *Eretz Hemdah* (Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies) of Jerusalem, directed by Rabbis Yosef Carmel and Moshe Ehrenreich: teachers from the institute would be sent to Italy with the specific task of providing rabbinical training. As a result, even though the rabbinical college's curriculum formally remained the same, the students trained in recent years have enjoyed an educational approach to their studies similar to that of their Israeli colleagues. There has been a particular focus on the study of the Talmud and Jewish rituals, reducing the time dedicated to the study of the Bible and complementary subjects.

In recent years, cultural globalization has affected also the rabbinical world, impoverishing its autonomy and cultural variety. The predominant cultural references of the Italian rabbinate are increasingly becoming the Sephardic-Eastern rabbinical authorities of Israel, who tend to be less flexible and less open to dialogue than traditional Italian rabbis. More and more, the politicization of the Israeli rabbinate (Sephardic and Ashkenazic) – who are appointed through the vote of government majorities – influences, directly or indirectly, the Orthodox European rabbinate and rabbinical courts, especially with regard to the certification of *kosher* foods, divorces and conversions. On the other hand, the intensification of inter-cultural exchanges has allowed Italian Judaism to abandon its provincialism, to get to know and study the theories of great masters from Ashkenazic *yeshivot* and the Hasidic world, and to debate on matters of common interest.