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“Light at the End of the Tunnel”: A Jewish Confraternity, Dowries, and Charity

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“In our time there is no other option but to acknowledge that only from attention to the shadows and the darkness, in unison with the light, the [historical] picture in its entirety will become clear.”¹

BEFORE REACHING HIS MID-THIRTIES, about the age when, according to the societies of the past, individuals were considered to have reached maturity,² Elimelekh Horowitz published an essay in *Tarbiz* that signified a leap forward in the study of dowry and marriage in early modern Jewish societies.³ Its point of departure was the analysis of an unpublished manuscript of the Hasi Betulot (dowering of brides) confraternity established in 1576 in Venice among Ashkenazi and Italian Jews, predating the one established by their Ponentine brethren by more than three decades. The essay’s subtitle is a nod to Jacob Katz’s work but alerts the reader of the author’s aim to go farther. In his analysis of the evolution of the commandment of assisting marriageable brides (*bakhnasat kalab*), Elimelekh placed it in the context of demographic restoration as well as

1. Elliott Horowitz, “‘Let the (Respectable) Poor Be Members of Your Household’: Charity, the Poor, and Social Control in the Jewish Communities of Europe between the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times” (Hebrew), in *Religion and Economy: Connections and Interactions*, ed. M. Ben-Sasson (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1995), 211.

2. Horowitz, “The Worlds of Jewish Youth in Europe, 1300–1800,” in *A History of Young People*, ed. J.-C. Schmitt and G. Levi (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 1:87–88.

3. Horowitz, “Dowering of Brides in the Ghetto of Venice: Between Tradition and Change, Ideas and Reality” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 56 (1987): 347–71.

of coeval Catholic institutions, as a way to better understand its historical meaning without diminishing the institution's Jewish pedigree.

Some of the features he would develop in his historical writing are already present in this early essay: a relentless search for balance between Jews and their particular regional cultures and the common cultural traits shared with the surrounding population, with a stress on the *Zeitgeist*; avoidance of facile parallels and reciprocal influences between religious cultures; and use of a diverse array of documentary sources with the aim of obtaining, from apparently incongruous results, a fresh vantage point on long-known texts. Analyzing together the material, the spiritual, and the social, Elimelekh also worked to keep the histories of different disciplines in mind. He felt a duty to the historical craft to explain the relation between the phenomenon and the place—he was always deeply in tune with the specificities with which he was dealing, and keen to avoid anachronism.

His unique methodology is evident in his doctoral dissertation on Jewish confraternities, where he tried to show “how much can be learned about lay piety from an intensive local study followed by imaginative analysis.”⁴ The dissertation reveals an anthropological investigation of rites related to youth, death, and early morning prayers—matters to which he would devote some of his most original and inspired writings in the years to come. Indeed, confraternities were for Elimelekh a vital window into the past, and his choice of Italy as a focus reflected, among other reasons, his own appreciation of deep familial associations with the country and its culture.

The *Tarbiz* essay encompasses a discussion of the historical and halakhic development of economic assistance to brides; a critical overview of the history of the Venetian confraternity, with its final transformation into a mutual aid society; and last, but not least, a clarification of missing details in *Haye Yebudah's* autobiographical narrative by Leone da Modena—who served as a *sofer* of Hasi Betulot. As a self-confessed Jewish autobiography reader, Elimelekh knew how to look at ego-documents critically and intertextually. As result, the source he uses exposes Modena's maneuvers to obtain benefits from the confraternity—among them, raising money for his daughters' (!) dowries and manipulating to his

4. See Horowitz, “Jewish Confraternities in Seventeenth Century Verona: A Study in the Social History of Piety” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1982), 16; quotation taken from Natalie Z. Davis, “Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion,” in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Early Modern Religion*, ed. C. A. Trinkaus and H. E. Oberman (Leiden, 1974), 314.

advantage the timing of a conflict between Hasi Betulot and another confraternity. These episodes receive no mention in Modena's autobiography, but Elimelekh exposes them and explains, with a touch of irony, how such crafty procedures were in fact habitual within the confraternity overall.⁵

The Hasi Betulot confraternity was originally devised as a "sacred charity"—in the image of the coetaneous Catholic *scuole*, using similar operating methods—for the specific purpose of dowering Venetian Jewish brides. It was established as a way to preserve brides' honor and virtue. But after examining the proceedings of this confraternity for over half a century, Elimelekh concludes that its goal was not to help poor brides but to extend a hand to the daughters of good families that had monetary problems or had trouble meeting the elite's high standards. As a matter of fact, and despite appearances, the confraternity later became a mutual aid society for its members. (Elimelekh also stressed the gendered component—women were active in confraternity operations for very specific purposes, and their roles diminished over time, a tendency consistent with the process of masculinization described for other confraternities.⁶)

"Dowering of Brides" presents a pioneering analysis of the historical and halakhic development of the commandment to dower brides, as Jews from the Talmud through early modern times adapted it to changing socioeconomic realities. The original emphasis on orphans as beneficiaries (stressed by Maimonides) evolved into funding maids' dowries, and authors who wrote in fourteenth-century Provence and Spain were witnesses to this shift. Taking to heart Elimelekh's warning against anachronism, we may still examine this dowry confraternity in light of another, earlier instantiation on another shore. The tradition of Jewish confraternities in medieval Iberia has an extended genealogy, spanning almost two centuries in some locales. On March 31, 1425, which corresponds to 12 Nisan, the king of Aragon granted license to a group of Jews of Saragossa, its most populous Jewish community, allowing the establishment of the 'Ose Hased confraternity with the declared aim of "caring for the poor and *marrying and helping poor orphans to marry*."⁷ We have to understand this unique reference in the context of the reconstruction of Jewish

5. Horowitz, "Cohen's Autobiography of Leon Modena," *JQR* 81 (1991): 461.

6. Horowitz, "Membership and Its Rewards: The Emergence and Decline of Ferrara's *Gemilut Hasadim* Society (1515–1603)," in *The Mediterranean and the Jews: Society, Culture and Economy in Early Modern Times*, vol. 2, ed. E. Horowitz and M. Orfali (Ramat-Gan, 2002), 49–51.

7. Fritz Baer, *Die Juden im Christlichen Spanien: Urkunden und Regesten. I/1: Aragonien und Navarra* (Berlin, 1929), 855–56 (no. 532).

life in the decades that followed 1391. Besides showing the Jews' close attachment to royal power, even for religious issues, the license makes clear that the dowering of orphans is not the primary focus, alluding to it only after reference to the more general *hesed* (mercy and kindness). Further documentary references to this confraternity, unfortunately less common than in the Italian example, only mention tax-exemption of kosher meat and wine to be distributed among the poor on the eve of Passover.

As result of the lack of evidence for any dowry confraternity for this early period,⁸ Elimelekh turned to responsa and wills to show an increased interest in supporting monetary dowries. He raises a matter that historians had addressed with respect to marriage contracts, namely the real cash amounts behind the contracts and the dowry negotiated by the couple's families in premarital agreements. He points to specific clauses within early fifteenth-century wills containing bequests of monetary dowries for local brides,⁹ not necessarily orphans. An examination of late medieval Hispano-Jewish wills offers a good vantage point, since they mention trousseaus and money bequests made by Jews in anticipation of death on behalf of their relatives, including maidservants.¹⁰ In addition, last wills throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries provide valuable insight into how Jews reasoned in the twilight of their lives, a subject that could be added to Elimelekh's trilogy of essays on death.¹¹

8. Elimelekh does not mention this Aragonese confraternity in "Membership and Its Rewards," probably because he did not find the evidence conclusive.

9. In her 1404 will, Astruga, the widow of Samuel Atzay Levi, bequeathed money for local maids ("puellis maritandis judeis dicte ville"); see G. Secall i Güell, *La comunitat hebrea de Santa Coloma de Queralt* (Tarragona, 1986), 155, 157, n. 90.

10. These are, among other instances in Aragon, the cases of Solita, maidservant of Sol Belida (Saragossa, 1405), Aljoharica, maidservant of don Seneor ben Meir (La Almunia de Doña Godina, 1439), Gracieta, maidservant of Oro (Monzon, 1463), and Astrugica, doña Astruga Albargeloni's granddaughter, in addition to the latter's bequests to four of her nieces (Saragossa, 1473); see respectively A. Blasco, "Mujeres judías zaragozanas ante la muerte," *Aragón en la Edad Media* 9 (1991): 109, 111–12; L. Minervini, *Testi giudeospagnoli medievali. Castiglia e Aragona* (Naples, 1992), 1:259; M. Blasco et al., "El testamento de doña Oro, esposa de Samuel Rimok, judía de Monzón (1463)," *Materia Giudaica* 14 (2009): 449–50; I discussed the contents of doña Astruga Albargeloni's will (forthcoming) with Elimelekh.

11. Horowitz, "Speaking of the Dead: The Emergence of the Eulogy among Sixteenth-Century Italian Jewry," in *Preachers of the Italian Ghetto*, ed. D. Ruderman (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), 129–62; "The Jews of Europe and the Moment of Death in Medieval and Modern Times," *Judaism* 44 (1995): 271–81; and "Speak-

I have chosen to discuss “Dowering of Brides in the Ghetto of Venice” because, while focusing on a central concern of early modern Jews around the Mediterranean basin—dowries—it also reflects Elimelekh’s deep interest in more intimate historical views. He wrote in 1986 that “we are still substantially in the dark about the fundamental but easily resolved question of what life was really like for the individual medieval Jew.”¹² It was precisely his balance between historical craft and the self that first drew me to Elimelekh’s scholarship: “Is the writer brought closer to the truth by forgetting his Jewishness or by remembering it?”¹³

When I had the opportunity to become acquainted with Elimelekh as a colleague in charge of convening a set of informal (“shadow”) seminars at the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies in Philadelphia in 2011, I could confirm in the man some of the personal traits reflected in every page he wrote: his wisdom, creative erudition, and his artistic and aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Above all, his passion for life mirrored in his love of family, friends, and *mitzvot*. I was fortunate that he shared his precious time and friendship with me during the Trinity term of 2015, this time as a roommate, when he joined Balliol College in Oxford as Smithies Fellow. He found there not only a perfect dwelling for study, auspicious for individual creativity, but also an appropriate setting for fostering an ideal spirit of comradeship and joy akin to the long-gone youth confraternities he studied.

ing to the Dead: Cemetery Prayer in Medieval and Early Modern Jewry,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999): 303–17.

12. Horowitz, “The Way We Were: *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*,” *Jewish History* 1 (1986): 75.

13. Horowitz, “Cohen’s Autobiography of Leon Modena,” 461.