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Il Ghetto: Exile and the Modern Imagination

Written By Murray Baumgarten, November 12, 2009

Devised by the Venetians in 1516, the Ghetto marks the beginning of modern Jewish exile. The Jews became a people under curfew, identified with and stereotyped as the money-lenders they were required to be as the condition of their ghettoization. Rather than a defeated rebellious people (as they had been viewed by the Babylonians and Romans), they were now the other against whom western Christendom defined itself, as it told them who they were allowed to be.

Sequestering the Jews in the Ghetto the Venetians sealed the Jews into a modern destiny: Jewish exile meant engagement in the intangible realm of money and finance. This was to make Jews whatever success they might achieve into luftmenschen — a people without land or national status, and thus without an independent identity — without as later generations would have it language, art, or culture of their own. Though they were granted the right to live in Venice, unlike the expulsion ordained by the Spanish Catholic monarchs, the Jews were fitted into the special status of pariahs.

Modern Jewish homelessness thus condemned the Jews to a life apart. "To be a Jew [was] to have a special understanding of loneliness," Isaiah Berlin noted. "It was also to know how deeply men and women needed to be at home somewhere in the world. Belonging was more than possession of land and statehood," he commented, "it was the condition of being understood itself." Not belonging, not being understood, never quite at home: exile isolates, turns the construction of identity against itself, as it generates cultural and personal incoherence, and challenges the very possibility of participation in the general human enterprise.

The modern Jew was born in the Venetian Ghetto as a figure of physical, emotional, cultural, and metaphysical exile. As if they existed solely in what we might call the proto-cyberspace of financial information rather than the material culture of everyday experience, Jews were set apart, and made into aliens. Like prostitutes to which they have been continuously compared, their work and lives were imagined as the making of something out of nothing. And the visual culture that surrounded them often showed ecclesia overcoming sinagoga in a deadly knifing as a symbolic act of violence.

These difficulties inform modern Jewish culture and writing. Jews responded to this situation by devising strategies of resistance, negotiation, subversion, and oblique ironic expression. Depending on who was listening, more and less could be articulated in this mode of communication initiated and developed by Venetian Jewish intellectuals. It would become a habit of mind central to modern European Jewish writing.

Only the Zionist movement was able to mount effective sustained arguments against this exilic construction of Jewish identity, speaking to the Jewish community as well as the larger outside world, in hopes of overturning this Jewish stereotyping that received renewed impetus in the twentieth century from Hitler and subsequent antisemitic campaigns. It is not thus accidental that Isaiah Berlin's comments were part of his acceptance of the award of the Jerusalem prize in 1979. In his remarks he underlined how the Zionist

revolution changed the conditions of modern Jewish exile, bringing to an end the exilic condition — physical, cultural, social, psychological, and metaphysical — that the Venetians had initiated.

Notes

Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Vintage, 2000), 292. By 1919, Einstein was the most famous scientist on the planet, thanks to empirical confirmation by A.S. Eddington of one of the predictions of the general theory of relativity (gravitational light deflections in a solar eclipse). And it was precisely at this time that Einstein reaffirmed his Jewish identity, or more precisely, his Zionism. In October he wrote to a colleague that "the Zionist cause is very close to my heart". I am very confident of the happy development of the Jewish colony and am glad that there should be a tiny speck on this earth in which the members of our tribe should not be aliens." See Dana Katz, *The Jew in the Art of Renaissance Italy*, especially chapter 1.

See Ariella Lang, "The Double Edge of Irony in Simone Luzzatto's *Discorso*," *Jewish Social Studies* (accepted for publication; expected out in 2009)

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