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Philosophy, Kabbalah and Science in the Culture of the Italian Ghetto: On the Debate between Samson Morpurgo and Aviad Sar Shalom Basilae

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Philosophy, Kabbalah and Science in the Culture of the Italian Ghetto: On the Debate between Samson Morpurgo and Aviad Sar Shalom Basilae

Abstract
Two common assumptions about Jewish culture in the period of the Italian ghettos have been disavowed by contemporary scholarship. First, that in contrast to the earlier period of the Renaissance, Jewish culture had become an arid intellectual desert, relatively devoid of contact with the outside world, sterile and uncreative, isolated and absorbed in pietistic and messianic delirium; and second, that the primary agent of this cultural retreat, that throwback to medievalism and obscurantism, was the kabbalah. To the contrary, we have come to learn that despite the patent diminution of social and cultural contacts between Jews and Christians engendered by the ghetto walls, Jewish culture remained vibrant, creative, and open to new expressions of literary and artistic accomplishment. Indeed, the ghetto, with all its negative connotations, was the virtual birthplace of bold innovations in Hebrew poetry and drama, in music, in medical and scientific writing, as well as in the traditional domains of rabbinics, moralistic literature, and liturgy. ¹ And kabbalah, paradoxically, as Robert Bonfil had recently argued, was the critical mediator between the medieval and modern worlds, the primary agent of many of these innovations, particularly in the religious sphere, and even of modernity itself.²

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Museum, New York, on September 17, 1989 and at Concordia University and
the University of Montreal on June 4, 1990.

¹ A complete bibliography is too immense to list here, but several examples are
worth noting. For poetry, see: D. Pagis, Al Sod HaTumat: Le-Toledot ha-Hiddah
ha-Irot be-Italia u-ve-Holland, Jerusalem 1986. For drama, see: J. Shirmann, Studies
in the History of Jewish Poetry and Drama, 2 Vols, Jerusalem 1979, I, pp. 44-94;
Ghetto', Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ed. A. Altmann), Cambridge,
And kabbalah, paradoxically, as Robert Bonfil had recently argued, was the critical mediator between the medieval and modern worlds, the primary agent of many of these innovations, particularly in the religious sphere, and even of modernity itself.²

That we might have expected many of these innovations to stem from the relatively open environment of the Renaissance period rather than the seeming closure and retrogressive conditions of the post-Renaissance world is an assumption based on the way we perceive reality, rather than the way our subjects might have perceived it, as Bonfil points out.³ Although we usually associate Jewish ‘openness’, ‘this worldliness’, and ‘integration’ with the stimulus of a tolerant and nurturing non-Jewish environment, such


⁴ Bonfil, ‘Changes in the Cultural Patterns’ (above, note 1). Although I consider Bonfil’s conclusions correct, I would express some reservations about his emphasis on the lack of innovativeness of the Renaissance period. Indeed some important innovations in Jewish culture were present in the latter era and some of the later trends he describes, especially the mediating role of the kabbalah, were anticipated before the ghetto period at the end of the fifteenth century. Cf. D.B. Ruderman, ‘The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought’, Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy (ed. A. Rabil Jr.), 3 Vols., Philadelphia, Pa. 1988, 1, pp. 382-433.

[VIII]
a conclusion need not be warranted. The fact remains that despite the relative depravity and squalor of the ghetto, or perhaps because of it, Jewish culture flourished and underwent novel and even radical changes.4

I would like to focus on only one component of the new intellectual configurations emerging within ghetto culture, that engendered by the Jewish awareness and creative use of the new sciences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I have argued elsewhere that medicine and science were important ingredients in the emerging intellectual patterns of Jewish life in early modern Europe, particularly among Italian Jews of the ghetto period.5 Here I would like to illustrate my contention by reference to one debate between two prominent Italian rabbis of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth centuries, R. Samson Morpurgo of Ancona (1681-1740) and R. Aviad Sar Shalom Basilae of Mantua (c. 1680-1749).6 By examining the complex web of issues raised by the rabbis' disagreement, their larger social and intellectual contexts, as well as the common assumptions held by each of the protagonists, I hope not only to locate the role of scientific discourse within their cultural world but also to underscore its symbiotic relationship to

4 See Bonfil, ibid.
5 See D.B. Ruderman, 'The Impact of Science on Jewish Culture and Society in Venice (with Special Reference to Graduates of Padua’s Medical School)', Gli Ebrei e Venezia secoli XIV-XVIII (ed. G. Cozzi), Milan 1987, pp. 417-448, 540-542 [republished in Ruderman, Essential Papers (above, note 1)]; idem, Science, Medicine, and Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe, Spiegel Lecture in European Jewish History (Tel Aviv 1987); idem, Kabbalah, Magic, and Science (above, note 2); idem, 'The Language of Science as the Language of Faith: An Aspect of Italian Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', המלשל לבויה רפס


[IX]
other primary expressions of Jewish religious thought: to philosophy, to Jewish-Christian dialogue and debate, to messianic heterodoxy, and especially to kabbalistic theosophy.

At first glance, the disagreement between the rationally inclined Morpurgo and Basila, *the great eighteenth century apologist of the authenticity of kabbalistic tradition*, as Gershom Scholem once called him,* appears to be no more than a case of *déjà vu*. Once again, we appear to be offered another glimpse of the repeated confrontation between the rational philosopher seemingly locking swords with the traditional kabbalist over defining the essence of spirituality in Judaism. In 1704, the youthful Samson Morpurgo, a twenty-three year old rabbi and recent medical graduate of the University of Padua, published a modest commentary on the popular ethical work, the *Sefer Behinat Olam* ("The Book of the Examination of the World") of Jedaih ben Abraham Bedersi ha-Penimi (c. 1270-1340). Morpurgo’s commentary called *Ez ha-Da’at* ("The Tree of Knowledge") attempted to elucidate the plain meaning of this small lyrical treatise on the futility and vanity of the world and on the rewards of the intellectual and religious life. On the surface there seems little to upset the most staunch traditionalist regarding this seemingly innocent effort. Bedersi’s work had been published in Italy as early as the late fifteenth century, and had been republished frequently, accompanied by a variety of commentaries. Bedersi, of course, was well known as an apologist for Maimonidean philosophy, but only in the last lines of *Sefer Behinat Olam* is his allegiance to the sage of Fustat overt.7

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8 *Sefer Ez Ha-Da’at* (Venice 1704); on Bedersi and his writing, see A. Halkin’s essay in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Jerusalem 1971, Vol. 9, pp. 1308-1310 and the bibliography he cites.
9 The work was first published in Mantua by Estellina, wife of Abraham Conat, between 1476 and 1480. Morpurgo, in his introduction, mentioned the commentaries of Moses ibn Ḥabib and Jacob Frances. Other commentators include Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, Isaac Moncon, Jacob (of Fano?), Leon of Mantua, and Immanuel Lattes the Younger. [See I. Broyde’s ‘Bedersi, Jedaih Ben Abraham’, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, New York and London 1907, 2, pp. 626.]
10 I quote from the English translation of Broyde, p. 626: ‘Finally, turn neither to
course of most of Bedersi's text, there remains much to recommend itself in nurturing ethical and religious sensibilities.

Nevertheless, some twenty-six years later, Aviad Sar Shalom Basilae, by then a distinguished colleague of the more mature and learned Morpurgo, still had a score to settle regarding this publication of Morpurgo's earlier years. In his Sefer Emunat Hakhamim ('The Faith of, or in, the Sages'), published in Mantua in 1730, Basilae mentioned Morpurgo's work several times before unleashing a strong denunciation of the entire composition. What particularly infuriated Basilae were two things: first, Morpurgo's introduction in which he extolled the rewards of philosophical investigation, singling out for special praise the intellectual achievements of Abraham ibn Ezra and Maimonides; and second, Morpurgo's appending a poem by the notorious Hebrew poet, Jacob Frances, of the seventeenth century, excoriating the excessive study of the kabbalah by Italian Jews.

The publication of Frances' poem was surely the most audacious and, in Basilae's eyes, the most provocative gesture on the part of Morpurgo. Morpurgo himself was undoubtedly aware of the possible consequences of his action and the controversy it was bound to stir up among the many devotees of the kabbalah. Although Morpurgo's first name is alluded to by others at the end of the work, he published the work anonymously, hoping to avoid the hostile reaction he apparently anticipated. The two brothers Jacob and Emanuel Frances were particularly well known for their satirical poems poking fun at the movement surrounding the messianic figure of Shabbetai Zevi and his followers. Jacob not only opposed the Sabbatean movement, but appeared to display the left or the right from all that the wise men believed, the chief of whom was the distinguished master Maimonides, of blessed memory, with whom no one can be compared from among the wise men who have lived since the close of the Talmud.

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11 Sefer Emunat Hakhamim, Mantua 1730, pp. 16b, 17a, 22a, 27a, 29b-31b.
12 See especially, ibid., pp. 29b-31b.
13 Sefer Ez ha-Da'at, pp. 35b-36a.
14 Ibid., pp. 36b, 37a.
uncompromising hostility to all students of the kabbalah, messianic enthusiasts or not. In 1661, he first published the same satirical poem against the kabbalah which immediately aroused the anger of the Mantuan rabbis, especially the kabbalist Solomon Formigini, who tried to confiscate all copies of the poem. Although Jacob evaded the Mantuan rabbis' recriminations by moving to Florence, he died in 1667, a sure sign of divine justice in the mind of his enemies. Although his younger brother lived on until the end of the century, the death of Jacob certainly quieted one of the most vociferous voices against the kabbalah in seventeenth century Italy. When, in 1704, Morpurgo republished Jacob's obnoxious poem, he was surely aware that he was reviving the painful memories of Jacob's diatribes among a rabbinic establishment fully committed to the study of kabbalah cleansed of its antinomian and heretical tendencies of the previous century. The nasty controversy had long been over, so why not let Jacob Frances' satire remain buried with its author? But Morpurgo went ahead impetuously, so it seemed, and republished the despised poem. By 1730, Basilae could still not forgive Morpurgo for his inexcusable indulgence. He was responsible for maligning the sacred traditions of Judaism just as Jacob Frances had done some seventy years earlier.

What then meets the casual eye of the twentieth-century observer is a classic, albeit belated, confrontation between a rationalist, a disciple of the 'infidel' Frances, and a kabbalist committed to defending the piety of kabbalists like himself and the centrality of Jewish mysticism within Jewish culture. Yet a closer examination of the larger context of Morpurgo's composition and Basilae's condemnation reveals certain anomalies not so easily explained away by merely positing a simple skirmish between the forces of rationalism and of irrationalism. In the first place, there exists the cordial, even friendly relationship between Basilae and Morpurgo, even during the time of Basilae's stinging critique. Basilae opened

15 On the Frances brothers, see: Scholem, pp. 516-518 (above, note 5); S. Bernstein, Divan le-Rabbi Emanuel ben David Frances, Tel Aviv 1932; P. Naveh, Kol Shirei Ya'akov Frances, Jerusalem 1969; and see the strong criticism of Naveh's work by E. Fleisher in Kiryat Sefer, 45 (1969-70), pp. 177-187 (in Hebrew).
his condemnation of Morpurgo’s work by emphasizing the good character of the author who ‘is known as a sage, a fearer of heaven and an expert in the books of the Torah’. And throughout his caustic remarks about the composition, he delicately refrains from mentioning Morpurgo by name even though he knows quite well the identity of the author. Even more revealing is a legal query from Basilae addressed to Morpurgo some fifteen years earlier. Despite Morpurgo’s ‘indiscretion’ in publishing Bedersi and Frances, Basilae was obviously not adverse from consulting Morpurgo as a rabbi and medical specialist on the legality of using a certain medicine for curing heart patients that consisted of wine of questionable religious sanctity.

Besides the good relationship of the two, we should note that although Morpurgo had no interest in the kabbalah, he was not hostile to it. In fact, he married the daughter of a distinguished kabbalist of his day, Joseph Fiametta, a fact not missed by Basilae who mentioned the latter in his defense of the moral character of the kabbalist leaders of his generation. Morpurgo’s good relations with Basilae and Fiametta, despite their seeming adversarial positions, invites comparison with those of several other contemporaries supposedly engaged in bitter ideological dispute. Years ago, Simon Bernstein was surprised to discover a cordial relationship between the kabbalist R. Mahalel Haleluyah, Morpurgo’s predecessor in the Ancona rabbinate and an acknowledged follower of Shabbetai Zevi, and Jacob Frances, the arch-enemy of the Sabbateans in Italy. Jacob Frances was also on good terms with the kabbalist Moses Zacut, and his brother Emanuel Frances apparently held a positive view of the kabbalah throughout his life. How often the historical evidence conspires

16 Sefer Emunat Hakhamim (above, note 11), p. 30a.
17 Samson Morpurgo, Sefer Shemesh Zedakah, Venice 1740, on Yoreh De’ah, n. 28, pp. 78a-79a.
18 Sefer Emunat Hakhamim (above, note 11), p. 31a.
20 Naveh (above, note 15), p. 34; Bernstein, Diwan (above, note 15), pp. xxiv-xxviii.
against our neat categories of who should be antagonistic to whom and that rationalists and kabbalists usually dislike each other. Even the usually judicious Gershom Scholem could categorically proclaim that Jacob Frances’ rationalism was ‘sufficient explanation for his uncompromising rejection of Sabbatean messianism’.21 Yet were all ‘rationalists’ (a term never carefully defined by Scholem) automatically anti-Sabbateans? And should we automatically define such formidable ‘rationalists’ as physicians Benjamin Mussafia or Benedict de Castro as irrational simply because they enthusiastically endorsed Sabbatean messianism? We are again confronted with seeming paradoxes which require our close scrutiny and utmost caution in interpreting them.

When we turn to examine the content of Morpurgo’s commentary and Basilae’s critique, our conventional wisdom about rationalism and irrationalism is further exploded. To be sure, Basilae would have liked us to believe that there were two distinct and uncompromising positions between the two protagonists. He enlists the homily of his colleague Moses Zacut on the distinction between ‘wise’ (hakham) and ‘discerning’ (navon) as they appear in two biblical passages: Genesis 41:39 and Deuteronomy 4:6. In the first passage, describing Pharaoh, the adjective ‘discerning’ precedes ‘wise’, while in the second passage, ‘wise’ precedes ‘discerning’, in reference to the Jewish people. This positioning of the two words teaches, according to Zacut, the absolute difference regarding the acquisition of knowledge between a Jew and a non-Jew. The latter ‘understands why a thing is like this or that, comprehends something from something else, and afterwards from these assumptions, he acquires knowledge, and if the assumptions are true, then the inferences (based on these assumptions) will be true. But for the children of Israel, all their wisdom is received from tradition, and from the latter, they comprehend something from something else...for ‘wisdom’ (hokhmah) is what a person learns from his teacher, and ‘discernment’ (binah) is what he understands by himself’.

21 Scholem (above, note 5), p. 517.
In Basilae’s view, this fundamental difference explains the fallibility of ‘gentile’ wisdom in contrast to that of Jewish kabbalistic tradition. Because the gentile philosophers relied exclusively on their own intellectual resources, their rational assumptions were eventually proven wrong so that by the time of Morpurgo and Basilae, all of Aristotle’s pronouncements about the universe have been rejected, contemporary philosophers ‘have completely denied’ his entire cognitive system, and philosophy in these times ‘has become something else never anticipated by Aristotle in the first place’. Thus to resurrect Bedersi’s outmoded philosophical ruminations for a present generation of Hebrew readers, and to extol the flawed insights of such students of the discredited Aristotle as Maimonides and ibn Ezra, as Morpurgo had seemingly done, was to ignore a fundamental existential reality of the eighteenth century, according to Basilae.22

Basilae’s persuasive rhetoric notwithstanding, Zacut’s stark contrast between wise kabbalists and discerning philosophers did not faithfully represent the positions of Morpurgo or Basilae at all, as the latter well knew. In reality, Morpurgo’s philosophy showed little appreciation of Aristotelian metaphysics and Basilae’s kabbalah was hardly reducible to the mere transmission of a sanctified tradition. When one identifies their real positions, it is the remarkable confluence of their views which is so striking, regardless of the strident tones of Basilae’s polemic.

Let us first examine more carefully the intellectual posture of Samson Morpurgo. What was the nature of his ‘rationalism’ and how would he define himself in relation to his philosophic forebears Aristotle, Maimonides, and Bedersi? From the opening words of his introduction, it is clear that he seeks to locate a median between the excesses of philosophical speculation that have lead to heresy, and a Jewish intellectual life absorbed in mystical theosophy. He excoriates those ‘evil and sinning men’ among the philosophers who have deviated from traditional beliefs.23 Yet he is unwilling to discard the baby with the bath water; there remains a

22 *Sefer Emuruit Hakhamim* (above, note 11), pp. 30a-30b.
23 *Sefer Ez ha-Da’at* (above, note 8), pp. 3a-3b.
tradition of honest and faithful philosophical speculation in Israel exemplified by Maimonides and ibn Ezra, and it is that tradition he seeks to defend and perpetuate. 'If the divine kabbalah is precious, so too is philosophy', he contends.\textsuperscript{24} He has no objection to the kabbalah per se, despite his inclusion of Frances' satire; he merely pleads for co-existence for both streams of Jewish spirituality.

Morpurgo also has in mind a particular emphasis in espousing the virtues of the philosophical quest. His primary concern from the opening line until the end of his work is with 'natural philosophy', with exploring the secrets of the natural world, the wonders of the heavens and the earth. He writes:

\begin{quote}
In every direction man turns, he will comprehend and be enlightened with wisdom, understanding, and intelligence.... If he turns his face to the West to see the sun setting in its majesty... he will understand the secrets of wisdom. If he gazes to the sky to count the stars and to know the laws of heaven and their constellations, he will... be made wise in everything. If he looks in the depths of sheol to fathom what is in the water under the earth... even there his eyes will observe that the ordinances of God are just.... In everything where [God's] spirit dwells, he will go until his intelligence and the spirit of his discernment will carry him easily among all creatures above and below, from one extremity to the other, so that from everything, he will learn intelligence and acquire understanding...\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Morpurgo also refers specifically to the quality of discernment, approaching the definition Moses Zacut had used but giving it a more focused meaning in relation to investigating the physical world: 'A discerning heart (lev navon)', Morpurgo writes, 'has no limit to its movements by which a person may wander the way of the earth to its length and breadth. For he loves and desires to investigate and trace the roots of his existence from when he was

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 3a.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 5b, commenting on Bedersi's text, chapter 2, part 1.
hewn'.

For Morpurgo, such an ideal investigation is the one he plans and enthusiastically shares with the readers of his introduction: a treatise on the laws of ritual purity of beef and fowl based on the science of surgery and medicine. It is also exemplified by his learned responsum to R. Joseph Cases, another physician from Mantua, in 1716, on feeding an ill person snake meat. His learned analysis of the various types of medical remedies, including the remedy of serpent meat, according to the views of the 'ancient doctors' as well as the 'modern doctors', is based on a thorough empiricism throughout.

Morpurgo's naturalism reflects a commitment to the new sciences of his day and stands in direct opposition to the dogmatic metaphysics of Aristotle and his commentators. In a striking departure from his previous reverence for Maimonides, he openly disputes Bedersi who has called for full adherence to all of the philosopher's positions. Morpurgo would countenance his views on religious law but nothing more. A new generation of researchers of nature had emphatically rejected Maimonides' notion of the active intellect based on Aristotle, of formless matter, of forms and accidents, of the four elements and the fifth essence, of heavenly motion, as well as his medical knowhow.

For Basilae, Morpurgo's negation of Maimonides' philosophical assumptions was sufficient proof ('as a hundred witnesses') of the emptiness of all philosophical investigation. But he had surely missed Morpurgo's point. It was not the specific answers that philosophers provided that were at issue; each generation investigates nature through its own devices and discloses something its predecessors had missed. What was critical was the search itself, the process of disclosure, the commitment to use one's senses of discernment to penetrate as deeply as possible the divine mystery. For Morpurgo, self-discovery was surely of greater value than mere acceptance of revealed truth.

26 Ibid., p. 5a. 27 Ibid., p. 3b.
29 Sefer Ez ha-Da'at (above, note 8), p. 34b.
30 Sefer Emunat Hakhamim (above, note 11), p. 30b.
If Morpurgo's empiricism informs his philosophical commitments, a similar empiricism informs Basilae's kabbalistic commitments no less. A short Latin compendium on the rules of geographical measurements strangely appended to Basilae's Hebrew defense of the kabbalah is as good a sign as any of Basilae's passionate interest in understanding the processes of nature. But Basilae's entire Emunat Hakhamim offers an even more eloquent testimony of how the study of nature, unencumbered by the assumptions of Aristotelian metaphysics, could be properly integrated with kabbalah. It is not the kabbalist, claims Basilae, but the Aristotelian philosopher, who remains blinded by his own metaphysical dogmas. He refuses to see nature as it really is; he approaches it with preconceptions that distort his vision, and he fails to acknowledge that the rabbinic and kabbalistic sages were wiser about the ways of the world than they were once thought to be. For Basilae, the study of nature can now become a tool to subvert the rational orthodoxies of the past while reaffirming the previously discounted sapience of the rabbis.31

Basilae's commitment to experimentalism in substantiating rabbinic opinions on nature is best revealed by two marvelous examples drawn from his work. In the first instance, he upbraids the Aristotelian philosopher Gersonides for questioning the rabbinic understanding of a biblical verse (1 Kings 6:4), assuming the rabbis lacked a precise understanding of the science of optics. Basilae proceeds to offer his readers a long discourse on the refraction of light rays, explains how light is dispersed through a wide aperture and shines more brightly through a narrow one, and finally closes his discussion by describing an experiment he performed with the aid of a rabbinic colleague. The scenario of the kabbalist Basilae, crouched in a darkened room with one of Venice's most distinguished rabbis, R. Jacob Aboab, examining the effect of light rays through a narrow opening in the window, performing a scientific experiment to reaffirm the truth of their sacred tradition, is as revealing a snapshot as any regarding the complexity of the

31 See Ruderman, 'The Language of Science' (above, note 5).
Philosophy, Kabbalah and Science in the Italian Ghetto

Jewish intellectual ambiance in the ghetto and the place of science in that setting.32

In the second instance, Basilae attempts to defend a seemingly odd position of the rabbis in B.T. Rosh Ha-Shanah 24b where two witnesses contend that they saw the old moon in the morning sky in the East and the new moon in the evening sky in the West. Although R. Johanan ben Nuri in the Talmud had declared such testimony false since the old moon could never be visible twenty-four hours before the appearance of the new, Basilae will not dismiss this observation out of hand. He enlisted the evidence of recent explorers of the new world, even mentions the writing of Johann Kepler, and then attempts to calculate the course of the moon in relation to the earth as it might appear in Jerusalem. Uncertain of his own tentative conclusions, he turns to two Christian astronomers in the city of Bologna, including the well-known scientist Eustachio Manfredi (1674-1739). Both men not only confirm his judgement and the testimony of the Talmud but Manfredi even writes a long responsum for him with many proofs, according to Basilae. No doubt such testimony confirming rabbinic sapience from so unlikely a source would have fully justified Basilae's exhalation in proclaiming the words of the psalmist (Psalm 144:15): 'Happy the people who have it so; happy the people whose God is the Lord'.33

Accordingly, the positions of Morpurgo and Basilae were indeed closer than either of them might have admitted. Morpurgo appreciated the kabbalah even though he was no kabbalist. And he, like Basilae, had repudiated Aristotelian philosophy firmly and unambiguously. Both enjoyed the startling insights of the new sciences and both, in their own way, embraced the new mood of Baconian empiricism.34 The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century had engendered a full restructuring of the relationship between what was rational and what was not, and the intellectual

32 Sefer Emunat Hakhamim (above, note 11), p. 6a.
34 Cf. Ruderman, 'The Language of Science' (above, note 5).
responses of these two rabbis were surely products of the new realignment.

If the two had more to agree upon than to disagree, why was there a controversy? Why so emotional an outburst against Morpurgo from Basilae over a quarter of a century after Morpurgo’s modest book had appeared? Why did Morpurgo reopen the wounds of the Sabbatean controversy in the first place with the republication of the Frances poem, and why did he conceal his identity if he believed his small publication would evoke little notice. By nature, Morpurgo usually shunned controversy as his moderate letters to the fanatical defender of the faith against heresy, R. Moses Hagiz, patently reveal.35 To act consciously in so provocative a manner was surely out of character for him.

I would argue that the debate had less to do with substance and more to do with appearances, that is, the fear of a Jewish leadership projecting an image of communal weakness, of intellectual and moral depravity in the eyes of the non-Jewish world. Morpurgo’s initial provocation and Basilae’s belated outburst reflect a deep-seated anxiety and insecurity about the viability of Jewish communal life, the authority of the rabbinate, and the ability of the Jewish community to withstand the continual social, economic, and intellectual pressures exerted by the Christian majority. Certainly the internal debate over the messiahship of Shabbetai Tzvi had taken its toll in dividing the community into antagonistic factions. But as we have seen, a semblance of mutual respect and tranquility between individuals in both camps still prevailed. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the controversy over Nehemiah Hayon, the disciple of Abraham Cardoso, and his public pronouncements about the nature of Jewish belief, engendered new acrimony and mutual recriminations from all sides.36 But the main issues of the


36 The most recent treatment of the Hayon debate is found in E. Carlebach’s work cited in the previous note, where ample bibliography is cited.
Hayon debate, as recent scholarship has shown, had little to do with Sabbatean messianism and much more to do with upholding rabbinic authority, containing heresy, and maintaining the proper public profile of the Jewish community within Christian Europe. In the many documents of the Hayon affair, the pervasive need to maintain the correct public face of the Jewish minority is the single most accentuated concern of the writers, including the peace-loving Morpurgo himself.

Upholding the proper image of Jewish life was an obsession shared equally by Morpurgo and Basila and seems to have set them on a collision course despite their shared religious and intellectual values, and despite their shared civility. Both had something else in common beyond what we have described already - a long and bitter encounter with Christian missionaries and polemists. A large portion of each rabbi’s intellectual output was devoted to defending the faith and good name of Judaism. At about the same time that Ez ha-Da’at was published, Morpurgo became entangled in a bitter polemic with the friar Luigi Maria Benetelli. In 1703, Benetelli had published a highly learned treatise against the Jews, citing an enormous variety of classical and contemporary Hebrew sources. In 1705, he published a summary of the responses of two rabbis of whom the first was Morpurgo, with his own rejoinder. Among the most critical points made by the rabbis against the Christian, two stand out: that the kabbalah was not essential to Jewish faith and that it does not describe the Christian


Morpurgo’s attitude towards the kabbalah was undoubtedly shaped by such Christian manipulation of Jewish sources. There was nothing wrong with the kabbalah per se; only when it rose to dominate and stifle other expressions of Jewish spirituality, Jewish faith became unbalanced, irrational, and subject to the kind of Christian missionizing in which the shrewd Benetelli excelled. And when Nehemiah Hayon arrogantly revealed kabbalistic secrets reminiscent of Christian dogma, the trinity in particular, the dangerous excesses of kabbalistic enthusiasm, the loss of rational anchors of Jewish faith, and the undermining of traditional rabbinic authority became blatant. The sanity and the healthy scepticism of Bedersi’s lyric message were surely appropriate to such a situation, and even the sarcasm of Jacob Frances was in place to counter the excessive influence of the kabbalists who had exposed a vulnerable Jewish community to dangerous enthusiasts like Hayon or to persistent missionaries like Benetelli.

Basilae’s encounter with Christian polemics was no less intense. His teacher and fellow Mantuan rabbi Judah Briel had long engaged in debates with Christians, and Basilae too composed a treatise defending the sanctity of the Jewish Passover against Christian aspersions. Yet the encounter for which he became a cause célèbre of the Mantuan ghetto occurred only three years after Sefer Emunat Hakhamim had appeared. As he was making his regular visit to the Mantuan prison on a Friday afternoon in May, 1733, he bent over to put money in the alms box, as was his usual custom, when suddenly a Christian hooligan painted a large cross on his rear. As he left the prison, he was mocked by the commoners of the neighborhood to whom he retorted angrily: ‘You should not laugh if you notice where the cross is placed’. His response so infuriated the church authorities that he was thrown in prison and held for almost a year despite his failing health. Even after his release, he remained under

40 I dardi rabbinici, pp. 8-9. This follows Benetelli’s Breve trattato della cabbala degli Ebrei.
41 On Basilae’s work, see; Simonsohn (above, note 6), p. 84; on Briel’s work, see: Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 4, pp. 1372-1373.
house arrest until 1739 and was restricted to the ghetto until his death in 1743.42

The incident of the rabbi’s defiant rear end and the publication of his Sefer Emunat Hakhamim are surely both related to Basilae’s profound sensitivity to Judaism’s beleaguered status in the mind of an often hostile Christian majority. It was certainly not the time for Jews to be seduced by the blandishments of scholastic philosophy that undermined their sacred calling. He scolds Morpurgo for extolling philosophy as a means of gaining favor in the Christian world and quotes Joseph Delmedigo about the dangers of exposing Jewish youth to the corrosive intellectual atmosphere of Paduan university life.43 How inappropriate to publish Frances’ criticism of Jewish sages and communal leaders when the latter’s authority is daily challenged and undermined! Rather it is time to reaffirm ‘the faith in the Sages’, in the unique truths of Judaism, and the sacred legacy of kabbalistic tradition.44 So formidable a tool as science can reaffirm the relevance and reliability of the kabbalists and their teachings. Basila’s brilliant defense of the kabbalah and its teachers, including his cutting remarks about Morpurgo’s writing, were surely motivated by the emphatic need to bolster the image of the kabbalistic scholar both within the Jewish community and outside it, to demonstrate anew, in Moses Zacut’s words, the superiority of Jewish ‘wisdom’ in comparison with mere gentile ‘discernment’.

In sum, a relatively minor series of events, the endorsement of the ideal of philosophizing by one Italian rabbi and the displeasure it evoked in another, tell us a great deal about the intellectual world of the ghetto at the beginning of the eighteenth century. What appears at first glance as the familiar jousting between a philosopher and a kabbalist reveals instead a more nuanced and dynamic cultural environment, one in which Jewish intellectual life

42 Simonsohn, ibid., p. 158.
43 Sefer Emunat Hakhamim (above, note 11), pp. 30a, 30b.
was deeply affected by new attitudes towards nature and science, but also one in which the stark reality of Christian belligerence and intolerance still intruded oppressively into the very enterprise of Jewish self-reflection and self-affirmation.