This collection of articles presents the proceedings of a conference on the Jews of Italy held in 2011 at Bologna University, in conjunction with Bar Ilan University and the Italian Association for the Study of Judaism. Most of the twenty-two articles represent new voices in the study of Italian Jewry from Italy and Israel. The articles and their notes provide a good opportunity to survey the recent scholarship on Italian Jewry, despite the fact—or maybe due to the fact—that several of the articles are very technical and present untranslated passages and terms. Although the articles do not reflect consistency in editing and translation, individually and collectively they provide valuable information and analysis about the current state of research of Italian Jewry in particular and in the context of Jewish studies in general.

The main title of this book, *The Jews in Italy*, immediately raises two significant questions about Jewish history in Italy that are more than semantic: What are “Jews,” and what is “Italy?” Taken in reverse order, the answer to the question of what is Italy involves many independent and semi-dependent, cooperating and conflicting political, cultural, and linguistic entities occupying what might better be called the Italian peninsula, which, after 1861, was unified as the Kingdom of Italy. Following Miriam Ben Zeev’s article, Jewish life in the Italian peninsula began in Roman times and early on had a presence in the south of the peninsula, where, according to Yaron Silverstein, it flourished under the influence of Jewish traditions from Palestine and Babylonia. There it would continue to be impacted by Arab, Spanish, and French culture.

The Italian Jewish communities in the north developed in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries after the forced conversions,quisition, and expulsions of the Jews of the Iberian peninsula and Spanish foreign holdings, including territories in the south of the Italian peninsula, especially Naples. Italian Jewry continued to expand after the expulsions and exoduses of Jews from French territories, the northern Tzorfatim, and the southern Provencalim, as described by Shimon Schwarzfuchs, and from the Germanic lands, the Ashkenazim, whose diet and family structures are presented by Zahava Weishouse.

The life of Abraham de Balmes (1440-1523), as described by Dror ben-Ariè is an example of the migrations of Jews in Italy: his family was from Spain, he was born in southern Italy, studied in Naples, and moved to northern Italy, where he died in Venice. In the northern and central communities, such as those of Venice, Florence, the Papal States, Mantua, Milan, Modena, and Ferrara, as well as so many small towns and even villages, during the Renaissance and Baroque periods Ital-
ian Jewish culture made, in the words of the subtitle of the book, a “Contribution to the Development and Diffusion of Jewish Heritage.” Despite the rivalries between the individual city states and duchies, the balance among these entities was further disrupted as Italy became the battlefield for forces outside the peninsula, including France, Spain/Holy Roman Empire, and Turks. Nevertheless, a sense of Italianness, Italianità, emerged and became the framework for Italian culture and Italian Jewish culture.

The second question raised by the title of the book concerns the words “Jews” and “Jewish.” This is a historical question and not a halakhic one. Several of the authors inadvertently raised the question by referring to “normative” (pp. 38, 44, 287), “Orthodox Judaism” (p. 164), “halakham” (p. 221), “halakhic” (p. 292), “uniform code binding on all Jewish communities” (p. 301), and other expressions of universally prescribed behaviors and beliefs for all Jews. Nevertheless, the book does deal with crypto-Jews and kabbalists, which highlights some of the range of Jewish life in Italy.

Furthermore, a monolithic Jewish culture, separated by the ghetto walls, did not exist, despite one author’s description of ritual as something that, “deepened the religious consciousness and established the foundation of a Jewish society that could withstand the antisemitic pressures that were waiting at the walls outside the ghetto” (p. 164). One of the most obvious aspects of Italian Jewish culture presented in this book that defies the division between Jews and others is the languages that Jews used. A significant measure of the interaction between Jewish and Italian culture is the various Judeo-Italian calques, words, and phrases brought in from other languages, and the eventual adoption of Italian in Jewish life. These phenomena undermine the notion of a lack of communication and cultural exchange between Jewish and non-Jewish culture.

The life of Abraham de Balmes further illustrates the blurring of boundaries between Jews and Christians. He studied philosophy and medicine at the university in Naples, served as the personal physician to a cardinal, lectured at the university in Padua, maintained relations with Christian humanists, translated philosophical works from Latin to Hebrew, and, influenced by trends in the study of Latin grammar, wrote a bilingual Hebrew-Latin grammar of Hebrew.

Michael Ryzhik’s study of the Hebrew translation of Giordano Ruffo’s equine medical treatise illustrates some of the same trends. Although the translation is anonymous, factors point to a southern Italian origin, probably from the fifteenth century. Some of the illustrative features of the work that highlight the range of cultural influences on the translator are that at times the Hebrew reflects Arabic influence and includes Italian words, and sometimes the translator will start to write a word in Latin, delete it, and put in a Hebrew word. Ora (Rodrigue) Schwarzwald’s study of Ladino translations of traditional Hebrew texts raises other questions of cross-cultural influences on Italian Jewry. The Ladino translations, however, present a paradox. While other translations into Judeo-Italian show the influence of outside cultures on Jewish vernacular translations, the Ladino texts, although originally based on the openness of Spanish Jews to the surrounding language, in Italy they represented a closure for some Jews to both traditional Hebrew texts and to the local Judeo-Italian dialects. The theme of Italian influences on Jewish culture is further demonstrated in Carmela Saranga’s essay on Jossipon and the Book of Jasher; both anonymous works probably originated in southern Italy during the Middle Ages. While these books present reworked biblical tales and Jewish historiography, they also integrate material from Italian history, including from Plutarch and Livy, thereby highlighting the influence of other cultures in Italy on Jews. In his very useful summary of Kabbalah in Italy, Moshe Hallamish, however, avoids the question of the sources of sixteenth-century Cordoverian and Lurianic Kabbalah in Safed. Were these new trends brought to Safed by Iberian
refugees or was there something unique to Safed that influenced the development of Kabbalah there, perhaps Sufism, a subject that has received much attention from scholars lately? Similarly, Yaniv Goldberg’s essay on dybbuk exorcisms struggles with the question of external influence or internal developments in Jewish culture, particularly in aspects of Kabbalah. In his survey of possession (dybbuk, ibbur, impregnation; gilgul, transmigration of souls) in Jewish life, he struggles whether to consider such beliefs and exorcisms as part of a tradition going back to the ancient world, medieval Iberia, and the Ottoman Empire, despite being banned by the church, or to explain them as an essentially Jewish phenomenon among sixteenth-century Safed kabbalists, although ultimately the essay concludes by placing the belief in possession and exorcism in the context of the shared culture of Jews and Catholics in eighteenth-century Italy.

The issue of Jewish influence on Catholic culture is presented by Maria Portmann in her study of depictions of Jesus’ circumcision in paintings by Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516), Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), and Titian (1488-1576). The question is, if Catholics were, at least in legislation of 1368, forbidden from attending Jewish feasts, how did they know about circumcision rites? Vernacular Jewish ritual guides, like Leon Modena’s Riti, were only published much later, in the seventeenth century. Old and the New Testament passages do not present enough information to account for detailed Renaissance depictions, as imprecise as they were. Hence, strong possibilities of interaction included Christians attending circumcisions against church legislation or Jews telling Christians what took place at these ceremonies. Miguel Antonio Beltrán Munar’s essay about Torah and nature in Italian Jewish thought during the Renaissance further presents the tension between understanding Jewish culture as an eternal essence stemming from God through the Torah, as seen in the work of Judah Moscato, or as in dialogue with surrounding culture, as seen in the work of Judah Alemanno.

In addition to most of the philosophical and kabbalistic articles, Yoel Shiloh wrote an important article for understanding family dynamics by following the paper trail of marriage negotiations. Having just published a book on the subject, I read this piece with great interest. The main argument is spot-on: the writing of the marriage contract, the ketubah, was preceded by private financial negotiations recorded in ancillary Hebrew or Italian documents, which were not always mentioned in the ketubot, which were not always standard, and which were not always preserved. In my own study, I found that ketubot documents obscure more than they reveal often in order to mask the social status and financial contributions of the families to protect the honor of all involved.

The modern period brought changes to Italian Jewry, but not like the denominations that emerged in western Europe and the United States, and many long-standing aspects of traditional Italian Jewish life remained intact. Alessandro Grazi presents Freemasonry, however exclusionary at its inception and fragmented as it developed, as an agent of enlightenment and democracy that enabled some change for Jews, as it had in other countries, despite continued legal restrictions on Jews imposed by governments and social limitations maintained among the populace. In Italy, Freemasonry played a role for Jews to build bridges with segments of Christian society, a phenomenon similar to that of Reform rabbis in Germany and the United States who were often Freemasons. Jumping ahead by a century, Smadar Shiffman treats the complex questions of Primo Levi’s identification: Italian/Jew, Jew/democrat, survivor/critic of Israel, and chemist/writer—indeed a microcosm of modern Jewish identity.

Several articles deal with the Jews in Italian colonies in the modern Middle East and Africa: Aleppo, Tunisia, Ethiopia, and Libya. Leah Bornstein-Makovetsky presents the relationship between rabbis of Italy and Aleppo, including the publication of books from Aleppo in Italy and the
exchange of rabbinic responsa about ritual matters between rabbis of the two communities. Rachel Simon highlights the role of Libyan Jews at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century as colonizing agents for Italy in Libya as the Ottoman Empire was deteriorating and Italy was creating a colonial nation-state. Jews in Libya, unlike the local Muslim population, were much more supportive of Italian rule, but they did not receive Italian citizenship. Yitzhak Mualem’s study presents a continuation of the role of Jews in Libya as colonization agents for the Italian government under Mussolini, who envisioned Jewish teachers from Italy advancing Italian culture in Africa. During the same period in Tunisia, according to Filippo Petrucci, the French and Italian colonial attempts for hegemony were played out by the competing Jewish educational systems: the French Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Jewish connection with the Italian Società Dante Alighieri. Silvia Guetta’s study of Florence highlights how Jews adopted the innovations in education that were emerging during the nineteenth century. These included primary schools, orphanages, kindergartens, arts and crafts schools, and boarding schools where Jewish children, poor and rich, boys and eventually girls, could get a Jewish and secular education that would enable them to raise their level of civic engagement and to improve their opportunities for employment. The director of each school, usually a woman, organized classes, taught, opened the school, and cleaned the building!

Two interactions between the Jews of Italy and the pope nearly 450 years apart highlight major themes of Jewish life in Italy. In Mauro Perani’s presentation on the oldest complete extant Torah scroll, he describes an unusual erasure of several verses from the scroll that were not replaced with any corrections; instead, the space was left blank. The verses were Leviticus 18:16-20. These are the verses that present the commandment that brothers- and sisters-in-law should not have intercourse with each other. This prohibition is contradicted by the procedure for a levirate union (yibbum) in which the brother of a childless deceased man produces a child with his childless widowed sister-in-law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Perani raises the fascinating possibility that this erasure could be due to competing biblical claims in King Henry VIII’s Great Matter, in which he wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. Both sides sought theological, including rabbinic, support for their positions. The king relied on this passage in Leviticus (18:16) that prohibited intercourse between a man and his sister-in-law since Catherine had been previously married to Henry’s late brother, Arthur. The pope opposed the divorce and based his claim on a passage in Deuteronomy (25:5-10) that would require Henry to stay married to Catherine and produce an heir as a surrogate for his late brother. Apparently, here we see at least one person who was willing to deface a Torah scroll to support the king’s position against the pope by erasing the Levitical verses forbidding intercourse between a man and his sister-in-law.

After centuries, tensions between the pope and the Jews did not fully abate. The pope’s different relationships with the Jews of Italy and with the State of Israel after the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel are illustrated in Eliav Taub’s study. The popes see the church’s relationship with the Jews of the diaspora as religious and theological, expressed in its regular dialogues with Jews, including the chief rabbis of the State of Israel, and it is based on an acceptance of the legitimacy of Judaism as a religion. However, the popes have not recognized the historic right of the Jewish people to self-determination in the Land of Israel with sovereignty over Christian holy places. Although the papacy slowly came to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, and it will now accommodate Israel as a civic entity and will relate with it in terms of intricacies of diplomatic matters, the
pope has met with Israeli leaders in neutral spaces outside of their official state government offices.

From the end of the Jewish kingdom in Palestine and the time of the Roman Empire to the establishment of the Jewish state and its relationship with the papacy in Rome, the Jews of the Italian peninsula have played a role in the emergence of Italy as Italian culture has played a role in the development of Jewish culture. As a bridge between cisalpine and transalpine Europe; eastern and western Europe; Europe, Africa, and the Middle East; and Ashkenazim and Sephardim, the Jews of Italy have incorporated culture from Jewish communities around the world and created their own varieties of Jewish life. *The Jews in Italy: Their Contribution to the Development and Diffusion of Jewish Heritage* highlights how at the communal level Italian Jewish culture embodies Italian, and indeed global, culture.

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