

THE SERMONS OF A RABBI CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY: BETWEEN SYNAGOGUE AND CHURCH

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Scholars have related to the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as 'an age of the sermon for Catholics and Protestants, as well as for Jews'.¹ During this period a vast number of sermons were produced and a new elaborate and eloquent style of sermon was developed.² Moreover, various genres related to preaching, such as guides and manuals on how to compose a sermon as well as proposed themes for sermons, were being created by both Christian and Jewish preachers.³ At the same time the Church, destabilized by the Protestant Reformation, hoped to 'demonstrate the Church's continuing vitality'⁴ through mass conversion of the Jews to Catholicism. One of the means which aimed to reach this objective was the forced conversionary sermon,⁵ an official conversional policy used already in the thirteenth century.⁶ Adriano Prosperi sheds light on the effect that these sermons had on the power-relationship between the Christians and the Jews, in his following description of the forced sermons in Rome:

¹ Ruderman D.B., (ed.), *Preachers of the Italian Ghetto* (Berkeley: 1992) 3.

² On the new style of sermons which starts developing in the sixteenth century see Pozzi G., "Intorno alla predicazione del Panigarola", in *Problemi di vita religiosa in Italia nel Cinquecento: Atti del convegno di storia della chiesa in Italia* (Padua: 1960) 315–322. For an overall view on the diverse types of sermons in this period see: O'Malley J.W., "Content and Rhetorical Form in Sixteenth-Century Treatises on Preaching", in Murphy J.J. (ed.), *Renaissance Eloquence* (Los Angeles – Berkeley: 1984) 238–252.

³ Manuals for Catholic preachers: Panigarola Francesco, *Modo di comporre una predica* (Milan: Paolo Gottardo Pontio, 1584). For Jewish preachers: R. Moshe ben Shmuel Blanis, *Tna-ei ha-Darshan* (Columbia University MS X893 T15 Q); Sosland H., *A Guide for Preachers on Composing and Delivering Sermons: The OR HA-DARSHANIM of Jacob Zahalon* (New York: 1987).

⁴ Stow K., "Church, Conversion and Tradition: The Problem of Jewish Conversion in Sixteenth Century", *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 2 (1996) 32.

⁵ See Stow K., *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy 1555–1593* (New York: 1977) chap. 10.

⁶ See Grayzel S., *The Church and the Jews in the Thirteenth Century*, vol. 2 (New York – Detroit: 1989) 142–145.

Going to the sermon meant offering to those curious inhabitants of the Christian city the opportunity of demonstrating straightforwardly the supremacy of their religion. This implied transforming the general theological claims into a direct and personal affirmation of power over an entire collectivity. One must imagine the relocation of hundreds of people from the ghetto to the church of the preaching, in the midst of crowds of curious people who commented, laughed, insulted, and at times moved into the realm of [violent (my addition)] actions.⁷

The notion of a 'forced conversionary sermon' was not an unproblematic issue for the Church, who officially defined conversion by force as illegal.⁸ The problem was overcome by acknowledging the legitimacy of using an *indirect* force with respect to conversion. This meant that coercing the Jews, not to convert, but only into a situation of exposure to a conversion influence, was accepted. A significant part of these conversion sermons were delivered by Jewish converts to Christianity, among them were also former Jewish preachers. This is not surprising if we take into account that the preacher, in order to reach his Jewish public, had to cross over into the 'terrain' of Jewish rhetoric,⁹ which was obviously much more familiar to a former Jew, and even more so to an ex-Jewish rhetorician.

The case examined in this study is especially intriguing. In 1583, only a year after his conversion to Catholicism, Vitale Medici, preacher and physician, previously known as Rabbi Jehiel of Pesaro, delivered at the Santa Croce Church two extensive sermons to the Jews of Florence. The following paragraph, cited from one of these sermons, describing what he imagines that his listeners are saying to themselves, reveals the nature of the rapport between Vitale Medici and his audience:

⁷ Proserpi A., "L'inquisizione Romana e gli Ebrei", in Luzzati M., (ed.) *L'Inquisizione e gli Ebrei in Italia* (Rome: 1994) 105: 'Andare alla predica voleva dire offrire ai curiosi della città cristiana l'occasione per l'esercizio diretto della supremazia della loro religione e cioè per trasformare le pretese teologiche generali nell'affermazione di un potere diretto e personale verso un'intera collettività. Si deve immaginare il trasferimento di diverse centinaia di persone dal ghetto alla chiesa della predica, in mezzo ad ali di curiosi che commentavano, ridevano, insolentivano e qualche volta passavano a vie di fatto'.

⁸ Stow, "Church, Conversion and Tradition" 28.

⁹ The papal bull of September 1st, 1584 *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* directed the conversion preachers to relate in their sermons to what the Jews had heard in the Synagogue that Saturday. See Parente F., "Il confronto ideologico tra l'ebraismo e la chiesa in Italia", *Italia Judaica* 1 (1981) 321-322.

Is it not he who was here in Florence with us for a long time, very much loved and embraced by almost everybody [...] he preached in our synagogue always praising and exalting the Mosaic Law and always insisting on observing it perfectly. What desire has come upon him now to be baptized? We truly do not know how to find the reason for this crucial instantaneous decision of his.¹⁰

Vitale Medici in this paragraph is trying to re-establish a previous relationship that he had with his audience, reminding his Jewish 'listeners' that he used to preach to them, as a Jewish *darshan* (preacher), in the synagogue of Florence.

Yet, while we have no record of the sermons that Vitale delivered when he was still a Jew, the sermons delivered at Santa Croce Church were published in 1585 by the Giunti press, under the title *Omellie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze nella Chiesa di Santa Croce*, together with another six sermons delivered by Vitale to a Christian public at various religious societies during the years 1584 and 1585. The two sermons directed to the Jews are surely the highlight of the book.¹¹ They demonstrate Vitale's oratorical virtuosity in a variety of ways: through their complete structure, which follows the model of contemporary Christian sermons; their use of three languages (Italian, Hebrew and Latin) and the broadness of their knowledge, both in Jewish as well as in Christian culture; in philosophy, natural sciences and medicine. While many other anti-Jewish works were written and published during this period, interestingly, the *explicit* intention of leading to the conversion of the Jews is conveyed particularly in the works written by converts.¹² Among these, Vitale Medici seems to be the only convert

¹⁰ Medici Vitale, *Omellie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze nella Chiesa di Santa Croce*, (Florence: Giunti, 1585) 13: 'Non é questo quello che é stato qui a Firenze tanto tempo con esso noi amato & accarezzato grandemente quasi da tutti predicava nella nostra Sinagoga, sempre magnificando e esaltando la legge Mosaica, e esortandoci sempre alla sua esquisita osservazione: che voglia dunque; gli é venuta ora di battezzarsi? Veramente noi non sappiamo trovare la cagione di questa sua si grande e subita risoluzione'.

¹¹ Other sources confirm that Vitale indeed delivered sermons to the Jews at the Santa Croce Church. See, for example, Lapini A., *Diario Fiorentino di Agostino Lapini dal 252 al 1596* (Florence: 1900) 222: 'A' di 30 di detto maggio, che fu il lunedì della Pasqua dello Spirito Santo, a ore 12, predicò in Santa Croce di Firenze uno ebreo fatto cristiano, chiamato maestro Vitale; quale si portò si bene, che fe' maravigliare ognuno che lo senti. E lo scopo suo fu per indurre al santissimo battesimo tutti gli ebrei, non tanto quelli che erono li presenti, che vi furno poco manco che tutti quelli che abitano qui in nostra città, ma ogni altro ; con tanta e si bella persuasione e grazia, che fe' maravigliare ognuno; fa oggi qui in Firenze professione di medico fisico'.

¹² See Parente, "Il confronto ideologico" 318.

in Italy during that period that had the privilege to publish his 'forced sermons to the Jews'.

Vitale Medici's sermons became quite well known, especially among other Italian converts in the following generations. While various writings of converts, for example Giulio Morisini's *Via delle fede*, display a certain resemblance to these sermons, Paolo Medici, in his *Catalogue of the Illustrious Neofites* addressed to other converts to Christianity and published in Florence in 1701, chose to *copy* certain sentences directly from Vitale Medici's sermons.¹³ Copies of Vitale Medici's book of sermons can be found nowadays in public libraries throughout Italy, with a predominant presence in Tuscany,¹⁴ mostly originating in local convents.

While a recent article of mine focused on the contribution of Vitale's sermons to the study of late sixteenth century history of the Jews in Florence,¹⁵ the present study examines these sermons as a case-study of the phenomenon of *conversion* from Judaism to Catholicism during the Counter-Reformation period in Italy, with the scope of analyzing the convert's relation to his various cultural worlds, from before and after his conversion. Vitale Medici's sermons to a Christian public reflect a total immersion in his new cultural world, which is expressed both in the content as well as in the texts cited. His sermons to the Jews, on the other hand, which were directed to a 'multiple faceted' audience: the Jews standing in front of him at Santa Croce Church whom he had the task to convert to his new faith, and at the same time a public with whom he shared a previous culture, reflect the complex phenomenon of conversion, especially regarding the question of continuity versus discontinuity.

Vitale Medici was undoubtedly very familiar with many aspects of the culture and lifestyle of his audience. In his sermons he constantly

¹³ Medici Paolo speaks of the segregation of the Jews in the exact same words as Vitale Medici. See Paolo Medici, *Catalogo de' Neofiti Illustri usciti per misericordia di Dio dall'ebraismo e poi rendutisi gloriosi nel cristianesimo per esemplarità di costumi e profondità di dottrina opera di Paolo Sebast. Medici sacerdote [...] al altezza reale di Cosimo 3* (Florence: Vincenzo Vangelisti, 1701) 63; Medici Vitale, *Omelie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 6.

¹⁴ In the following locations: Florence, Siena, Empoli, Montepulciano, Pisa and Prato.

¹⁵ See Furstenberg-Levi S., "The Boundaries between 'Jewish' and 'Catholic' Space in Counter-Reformation Florence as seen by the Convert Vitale Medici", *Italia – Studi e ricerche sulla storia, la cultura e la letteratura degli ebrei d'Italia* 18 (2008) 65–90.

insists on demonstrating this familiarity by reconstructing what the Jew would probably be saying, in various circumstances. The expressions ‘io m’immagino’ (I imagine), or ‘dirà l’ebreo’ (the Jew will say) reoccur often in his sermons.

The acquaintance with both Jewish and the Christian ‘cultural territories’ gave Vitale the possibility to move freely between them in his sermons, even though one must bear in mind that the setting of the two forced sermons is grounded completely in ‘Christian territory’ – they were delivered in the Santa Croce Church – on significant days for the Christians, during the year 1583: One – ‘On the Divine Sacrifice’ – (brought as second in the published book) was on the Sunday after the Epiphany, while the other – ‘On the Sacrosanct Baptism’ – was presented on the second day of the Pentecost.¹⁶

An analysis of his sermons to the Jews shows that Vitale utilized this possibility of moving between ‘cultural territories’ in a variety of ways: at times, yet not often, he entered into the ‘Jewish territory’ with the intention of meeting his audience on a common ground, benefiting from his knowledge of their world in order to create a more convincing and efficient rhetoric; other times he clearly remained in his new ‘Christian territory’, while emphasizing the *differentiation* and the borders between his old world and his new world, showing why he belongs to the one and not to the other. Yet, the most common way of his moving between cultural spaces was entering into the ‘Jewish territory’ with the intention of ‘invading’ it. The following is a demonstration of how these various modes are used in the text of the homilies.

Vitale, in his conversionary sermons, explicitly announces to his new-old audience that he is eagerly *breaking the silence with* them.¹⁷ A careful examination of the text will show that Vitale inserts into the sermons a few expressions which were used exclusively among the Jews. For example, when speaking about the Second Temple of Jerusalem,¹⁸ Vitale uses the term ‘seconda casa’ (second house) which derives from the Hebrew term *bayit sheni*,¹⁹ or when referring to Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* he uses the first word of the Hebrew

¹⁶ The holiday of Pentecost is, according to the Christian tradition, a common time for baptism. This custom is based on *Acts of the Apostles* 19:5–6.

¹⁷ See Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 28.

¹⁸ Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 23.

¹⁹ As Michael Ryzhik pointed out in his lecture “La Bibbia dal pulpito: le citazioni bibliche nella predicazione Cristiana e giudeo-italiano del Cinquecento”, in the 43rd Congress of the Società di Linguistica Italiana, Verona, September, 2009.

title – *Morè*, which means guide or teacher.²⁰ These were probably the words he used in his sermons in the past, delivered in the synagogue, when relating to these concepts. This employing of an ‘inner’ language can clearly help create the impression of a meeting point between the preacher and the audience, which could be a tactic to lead his public in his footsteps.

In his sermon on ‘Baptism’, Vitale leads his Jewish audience on a ‘spiritual journey’. He starts off by joining them in their ‘territory’, and slowly he moves them over to the other side. He begins by telling the Jews to turn to the ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, words which are taken from the Jewish prayer. Vitale then instructs them to continue this spiritual journey with a personal oration that they should say:

I was born a Jew and I observe the Mosaic Law, the best I can. If you approve of this observance as you liked (before), make me remain in it steadily and constantly. But why do I find myself in this long captivity, with much misery and vileness [...].²¹

He then dictates the following supplication:

God, please do me the favor of showing me this truth, and make me capable of being certain if it is yes or no.²²

After indicating the reading of various chapters from the book of Psalms as the subsequent step, Vitale ends his ‘spiritual instructions’ with the following ‘reassuring’ words which lead back to his own personal experience:

You will see that God will let you know the truth [...] and you will get to know that which I got to know, which I reached in this way, and used an infinite amount of times, and that the Blessed God has granted me [...].²³

²⁰ Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 40, 42.

²¹ ‘Io sono nato Ebreo, & osservo quanto posso la legge Mosaica, se questa osservazione ti è in grazia, come di già tanto te ne compiacevi, fammi Signor restar fermo e costante in essa. Ma perche mi trovo in questa tanto lunga cattività con tanta miseria, e bassezza [...]’. Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 16.

²² ‘Signor piacciati, piacciati prego di farmi capace, e manifestarmi questa verità, che io sia certo di sì o no’. Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 16.

²³ ‘Tu vedrai che il Signor Dio ti farà conoscere il vero [...] e conoscerai quello, che ho conosciuto io, che ho tenuto questo modo, usatolo infinite volte e Dio benedetto mi ha esaudito’. Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 16.

Starting this imposed 'prayer' with the very words which open the most important Jewish prayer is surely one of the many ways that Vitale employs in order to persuade his Jewish audience to join him.²⁴

However, a large part of the sermons accentuate the separation, both cultural and physical, between Vitale's space and that of his audience. While Vitale Medici displays a fluent knowledge of the Jewish sources²⁵ through extensive citations from the *Tanach* (Jewish Bible) the *Midrash*, the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, Maimonides' code on Jewish Law (*Mishne Tora*), and references to the *Zohar*, Nahmanides, Rashi, Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* and to Isaac Abrabanel's *Commentary of the Pentateuch*, an examination of the way he utilizes these sources shows that he makes a very clear-cut division between his cultural world and that of the Jews. He disassociates himself from those Jewish sources, which used to connect him to his Jewish public, by associating the authors of these sources exclusively to his Jewish listeners: 'your Rabbis in the Talmud' (*I vostri Rabbini nel Talmud*); 'your Rabbi Moses the Egyptian' (referring to Maimonides), 'your Abarbanel' etc. At times he adds to the term 'your Rabbis' a specific criticism or just a general negative connotation. For example the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi (Rabbi Solomon Ben Yitzchak) is mentioned as an example of how one should not study the prophets.²⁶

Study however the Prophets with a pious mind and a soul unclotted of any pre-sentiments. Not as a way to escape the Messiah, as your Rabbi Solomon, but as a way of finding him and knowing the truth.²⁷

This division between his and their world is extended also to the space which used to connect them and now became 'your synagogue', which is part of the ghetto, a physical space which Vitale clearly chose to disassociate himself from:

²⁴ In other parts of the homilies Vitale cites additional sections of this Jewish prayer. See Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 48.

²⁵ In addition to Vitale Medici's Jewish sources, which are the main concern of this study, he cites freely from Aristotle, Virgil and Cicero as well as a few references to the New Testament and other Christian sources.

²⁶ Rashi believed that Isaiah 52:13–53:12 refers to Israel as opposed to Christian exegesis which saw in this source a clear biblical reference to the Messiah.

²⁷ 'Studiate dunque li Profeti, con pia mente con animo spogliato d'ogni affetto, non per fuggire il Messia, come fa il vostro Rabi Salomone, ma per ritrovarlo, e conoscere il vero'; Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 48.

Because being in this extreme misery in which *you* find yourself, totally immersed in poverty, and begging, persecuted under this regime, expelled by the other, restricted to *that* small place [...].²⁸

Despite the clear borderline which Vitale Medici draws between the Jews and himself he chooses to use the Jewish sources as one of his main persuasive means to convince his public to believe in Christian fundamentals.

During the Counter-Reformation the use of rabbinical sources as a legitimate conversational method was accepted by the Church. Yet, paradoxically, at the same time the Roman Inquisition gave the order to have the Talmud burned publicly in Rome in 1553. The Church was perturbed by the question of which approach was more effective as a conversational means: eliminating the Talmud,²⁹ as a source full of blasphemy against Christianity, or on the contrary, demonstrating to the Jews that the rudiments of Christianity are proven in the Talmud.³⁰ The latter approach, adopted by Vitale Medici, was initially developed in the medieval anti-Jewish work *Pugio Fidei* written by the Spanish Christian theologian Raymond Martin. In fact, a close examination of Vitale's sermons shows that the various citations which he brings from rabbinic sources appear also in the *Pugio Fidei*. From this we can deduce that Vitale was very careful in his use of rabbinic sources, which, for a former Jewish preacher must have meant a significant change, considering that the typical Jewish sermons of the time were usually very rich with citations from rabbinic sources: they would generally commence with a citation of a verse from the *Torah* following a rabbinic statement. Only after that, was the theme of the sermon introduced. This meant that a Jewish *darshan* who preached at least once a week, would utilize a numerous amount of rabbinic references throughout a year, whereas Vitale was limited to the restricted selection of quotations from rabbinic sources which 'served' the Christian

²⁸ '[...] perche' stando voi in questa estrema miseria, nella quale vi trovate tanto immersi poveri, mendichi, perseguitati in questo Regno, discacciati da quell altro, ristretti in quell picciol luogo [...]', Medici, *Omelie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 6.

²⁹ This was done often by the neophytes themselves. See Segre R., "Neophytes During the Italian Counter-Reformation: Identities and Biographies", in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies* 2 (Jerusalem: 1975) 139–142.

³⁰ For a thorough description of these paradoxical stands of the Church see: Stow K., "The Burning of the Talmud in 1553, in the Light of Sixteenth Century Catholic Attitudes toward the Talmud", *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et de Renaissance* 34 (1972) 435–459; Parente, "Il confronto ideologico" 303–373.

cause. The Talmud is introduced in the sermons as revealing the Christian truth:

Take notice Jews, take notice Jews, and God should be thanked for giving me the knowledge of this truth and he operated in a way that I acknowledged this authority of the Talmud, of which you will now hear, and open properly the eyes of the mind, which (if you are capable of reasoning) should be enough to make you convert. The supreme providence of the grand God started demonstrating to the Jews manifest signs that same year in which his son was crucified [...].³¹

Vitale then brings the following Talmudic paragraph, from the tract *Yoma*, also cited in *Pugio Fidei*:³²

Our Rabbis taught: During the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple the western-most light did not shine; nor did the crimson colored strap become white; nor did the lot come up in the right hand; and the doors of the *Hekal* would open by themselves [...].³³

After citing this Talmudic source which describes a period in which the miraculous signs in the Temple, which until that time acted as a demonstration of the closeness and forgiveness of God, were not functioning anymore, Vitale proceeds to give his own interpretation of the quote:

Well then, let us begin to affirm these words of the Talmud, which begin as following: forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the time that Christ was crucified; it was that same year, this, Jews, do not deny [...].³⁴

The Jewish tradition interprets the cessation of these signs as a warning or a prediction of the future destruction of the Temple. Vitale

³¹ 'Notate Ebrei, notate Ebrei, e sia ringraziato Dio, che mi ha fatto conoscere questa verità, & ha operato in modo, che io habbia visto questa autorità del Talmud, laqual ora sentirete, & aprite bene gli occhi della menta, che sol questo (se siate capaci di ragione) vi ha da bastare a farvi convertire. La somma provvidenza del grande Dio cominciò a mostrare a gli Ebrei [...] segni manifesti quel medesimo anno che crocifissero il suo figliuolo[...]; Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 19.

³² Martin Raymond, *Pugio Fidei: ad versus Mauro set Judaeos* (Leipzig: 1687) 370.

³³ 'תנו רבנן: מ' שנה קודם חרבן הבית לא היה נר מערבי דולק ולא היה לשון של' [...] זהורית מלבין ולא היה גורל עולה בימין והיו דלתות ההיכל נפתחות מאליהן [...]'. This quotation is similar to the version from *The Babylonian Talmud*, "Yoma" 39b.

³⁴ 'Orsu cominciamo a dichiarare queste parole del Talmut, lequali cosi' cominciano. Quarant'anni avanti la destruzion del Tempio, il tempo quando fu crocifisso Cristo; fu questo medesimo anno, questo non lo negare Ebrei [...]; Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 20.

Medici, on the other hand, diverges from this reading while continuing a line of thought developed in the *Pugio Fidei*, both in his specific choice of citations from rabbinic sources as well as in some of his main general claims – namely, that the Talmud proves the belief in Christian fundamentals. Another general claim which they have in common and often try to prove is that the Jews themselves do not listen to their own authentic Torah, or in other words used by Vitale ‘don’t believe in Moses’³⁵ due to the distorted understanding of their ‘ancient Rabbis’. In the examples above Vitale takes over the ‘Jewish cultural space’, while dispossessing the Jews from their own traditional sources.

While this study so far has emphasized the divisions between Vitale Medici’s cultural territory and that of his audience, the following section will show that a careful examination of the sermons, through the viewpoint of the cultural reality of the Italian Jews of that period, can expose a possible continuity in Vitale’s positions from before and after his conversion. Sermons usually echo various actualities of the specific time and place in which they are given. In fact, a perusal of Vitale Medici’s sermons to the Jews shows that he touches the subject of several important controversies that took place within the Jewish communities in Italy of that period. Although he articulates his opinions harshly and aggressively, if we view some of them in the context of the disputes which took place within the Jewish society, our understanding of the meaning of Vitale’s conversion may be slightly modified. The internal non-resolved issues which Vitale alludes to in his sermons range between questions regarding the Jewish religious law (*Halakha*) and discussions concerning various currents in Jewish Thought.

Issues Regarding Halakhic Disputes

One of the halakhic issues which Vitale refers to is the issue of wine which is not used for sacramental purposes.³⁶ The Jewish law forbids any use of the wine used by idolaters for libation. To this law the Rabbis added a subsidiary law against drinking wine touched by idolaters, even if they have not used it for sacramental purposes. The application

³⁵ Medici, *Omelie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 54.

³⁶ This halakhic issue has been entitled ‘Ordinary Wine’ (in Hebrew: *Stam Yainam*).

of this law to different actualities is complex, and one of the questions raised often was: who is considered an idolater.

The Jews in Italy were known to have a lenient attitude in relation to this subsidiary law. Although most of the Italian Rabbis did observe this law, there were among them those who were not strict in observing it. Moreover, most of the Italian Rabbis kept silent in regards to the non-observance of this law by the members of their communities.³⁷

In his sermon on 'Baptism', while sermonizing to the Jews on their difficulty to accept the Christian faith, Vitale Medici accuses them of perceiving Christianity as idolatry. Since they won't accept this accusation, Vitale tries to prove to them that this is indeed their approach. After referring to a specific text in which Maimonides expresses this claim outwardly, Vitale continues by showing them that their behavior discloses this perception:

But I would like to prove to you through the senses, through experience, that you claim that this Faith is idolatry. Do you deny that those Jews who act as though they were saints and the Pharisees that are, I would say, scrupulous observers of the ceremonies of the Mosaic law, avoid drinking wine made or touched by a Christian? Certainly in many places in Italy, and universally in all the Levant this is observed extremely rigorously, and why is this? Because they believe that Christianity is idolatry.³⁸

We do not have any references that indicate what Vitale Medici's stand as a Rabbi was before his conversion. If he was indeed among those Italian Rabbis who didn't strictly observe the prohibition to drink wine touched by gentiles, we can see the position taken in the above paragraph, as a convert, as a rather natural continuation to his previous opinions.

³⁷ The lenient approach to this law distressed many Rabbis outside of Italy, of whom some tried to intervene. On this complex issue see the following article in Hebrew: Cohen G., "le-toldot ha-pulmus al stam yaynam be-italya u-mekorotav" (On the History of the Polemics Regarding 'Ordinary Wine' in Italy and its Sources), *Sinai* 77 (1975) 62–90.

³⁸ 'Ma io vi vò provare per il senso, per la sperienza, che voi tenete che questa Fede, sia Idolatria, mi negherete voi, che quelli Ebrei che fanno il santo e il fariseo, che son, dico, scrupolosi osservatori delle cerimonie della legge Mosaica, si astengono di nò voler bere il vino, che fa, o che tocchi il Cristiano? Certo in molti luoghi della Italia e universalmente per tutto Levante, l'osservano rigorosissimamente, perche questo? perche essi credono, che il Cristiano sia Idolatra'. Medici, *Omellie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 18.

There is however one case, in his sermons, where Vitale Medici reveals what his opinion was before his conversion, when he was still preaching to the Jews in the synagogue. Vitale addresses the miserable way of life of the Jews, which includes their being constrained to earn a living in non-decent ways, such as money-lending:

You always have to struggle to think, to torment yourselves, to speak, to act and to find ways to earn [a living] in a lawful or unlawful way. Whether the income is acquired legally or illegally, you are always involved in offending your neighbor by holding his belongings against the good conscience, and therefore you cannot be saved, even if your law, presently useless, would be good and true, and do not think that it is highly [good], and that it is allowed to swindle goods, and cheat the Christian. It is not so, it is not so.³⁹

He then refers to his sermons from that period:

You know how many times I warned you while I read to you in your Synagogue and I showed you very effectively that it is more of a sin to swindle a Christian than a Jew.⁴⁰

If this declaration of Vitale indeed reflects the historical truth, one can understand that Vitale Medici, when still Rabbi Jehiel of Pesaro, preached against the use of usury.⁴¹ Vitale Medici, in both the above issues takes a stand of avoiding an attitude which might seem offensive to the non-Jews: he does not accept the 'Ordinary Wine' law which would be indicating that the Christians are idolaters, and he preaches against the problematic aspects of money-lending regarding its moral

³⁹ 'Sete sforzati a pensare sempre, a travagliare, a parlare e operare e trovare modi di guadagnare per *fas* o *nefas*, o lecito o illecito, che il guadagno sia, eccovi sempre immersi nella offesa del prossimo con tenere la sua roba contra alla buona coscienza, e così voi non vi potete salvare, ancor che la vostra or inutile legge fosse buona, e vera e non vi pensate che sia altamente, e che vi sia licito fraudare la roba, e ingannare il Cristiano che non è così, non è così'. Medici, *Omellie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 6–7.

⁴⁰ 'Sapete bene quante volte ve ne avvertivo quando vi leggevo nella vostra sinagoga e vi mostravo tanto efficacemente che e' più peccato ingannare un Cristiano che un Ebreo'. Medici, *Omellie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 7.

⁴¹ The Jewish sermons which have reached us from that period give the impression that the sixteenth century Italian Rabbis usually did not preach explicitly against the use of usury in regard to non-Jews, only in regard to Jews. This is probably a consequence of the economic situation of the Jews which would have deteriorated without the possibility of the money lending enterprise. Rabbi Azariah Figo in his *Sefer Binah le-Itim*, drush 10, speaks against usury in a way that appears general, but careful reading shows that he is referring to taking usury from Jews.

implications. These were unresolved issues within the Italian Jewish society of that period.

The Debate Between Rational and Mystical Approaches in Judaism

Controversy in the Jewish society of the sixteenth and seventeenth century was not limited only to the area of *Halakha*. In this period the realm of Jewish thought began to include a larger variety of 'bodies of knowledge' which were not always in agreement among themselves. In his book *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, Robert Bonfil describes the infiltration of the Kabala into the lives of the Jews in Italy.⁴² According to his analysis, after a period in which the knowledge of Kabala was restricted to narrow circles, in the sixteenth century it started entering into broad Jewish circles. This can be seen, for example, with the printing of the Zohar in Italy, first in 1558 (in Mantua) and soon after that in 1560 (in Cremona), and in the introduction of the Kabbalistic ideas, in this period, into the Rabbis' sermons.⁴³ Yet, at the same time we find Rabbis who strongly disagreed with this increasing tendency and expressed their disapproval explicitly.⁴⁴ As in regard to most other issues, Vitale's opinions in this realm, before his conversion, are unknown to us.

In his sermons, Vitale relates both to Maimonides, the prototype of rational approach as well as to the Zohar and Nahmanides, the sources which were becoming more popular in the Italian-Jewish intellectual panorama. He relates to all three of these sources as having 'maggior autorità'⁴⁵ for his Jewish listeners, yet the sources belonging to the 'mystical' trend are granted the additional title 'principalissimi' (the most fundamental), and he describes their content with enthusiasm. The Nahmanides's account of the manna – 'a preeminent light which, materialized through its creator's will', which is very similar to that of the *Zohar*, is accompanied by Vitale's exclamation: 'Oh, beautiful words! Oh, holy words!'⁴⁶ The kabbalistic interpretation fits perfectly

⁴² See Bonfil R., *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: 1994) 169–178.

⁴³ Such as Rabbi Judah Moscato.

⁴⁴ Such as Leone da Modena and Simon Luzatto.

⁴⁵ Maimonides: Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 18; Nahmanides and Zohar: Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 55.

⁴⁶ 'Oh belle parole, o sante parole', Medici, *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 55.

with the Christian concept of the Eucharist, and Vitale seems to be clearly using the Kabala to promote his Christian ideas. Nevertheless, his enthusiastic reaction to the Kabalistic mode of interpretation raises the query if, before his conversion, he was among the Rabbis who promoted the diffusion of Kabala, and if he is continuing a spiritual tendency which existed already before.

Interestingly, also issues that apparently may seem to be expressing a particularly *Catholic* view, can be seen as continuing tendencies in the Jewish cultural world. An interesting task in the analysis of the sermons of Vitale Medici, previously a Jewish preacher, is tracing his oratorical models. One would wonder if he maintains a familiar form when preaching to his 'audience' from the past, or if he completely 'converts' his sermons. Our case would seem to be pointing clearly towards a complete alteration into a Christian direction. In search of his oratorical models, one must note that the only preacher who Vitale mentions in his sermons is Papa San Leone, from the fifth century, who was the first Pope of whom we have an organic collection of his sermons. Vitale refers to him when discussing the figure of Melchizedek, in the context of the division that he makes, in his sermons, between two types of priests:⁴⁷ the prototype of Aaron which is associated with a particular genealogy, and that of Melchizedek which is not connected to a carnal birth, but as Vitale elaborates, can be 'from any nation, any sort of person, as long as they are capable'.⁴⁸ As a convert, emphasizing the 'Melchizedek model' is essential for Vitale.

As to the structure of his sermons, Vitale seems to be modeling them on contemporary Christian guidelines. Both sermons are composed of: an introduction; the body of the sermon which contain two parts, in which the second part introduces a new type of narrative in relation to the first part; a short summary and a prayer at the end.⁴⁹ While we have classified Vitale Medici entirely as a follower of the Christian oratorical model, we must take into account that during that period

⁴⁷ See, for example, Pope Leo I, *Omellie Lettere*, Mariucci T. (ed.), (Turin: 1969) 59, 70.

⁴⁸ '[...] ma d'ogni nazione, d'ogni sorte di persone, pur che siano idonei'; Medici, *Omellie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 51.

⁴⁹ Vitale Medici delivers his sermons more or less during the same period that Panigarola was writing his manual on how to compose a sermon. Although Vitale would not have seen this work, it is interesting to point out to the similarities between the structure of his sermons and the instructions given by Panigarola, starting in the fourth chapter of his *Modo di comporre una predica*.

we begin to find also among Jewish preachers, who are completely faithful to their own religion, those who construct their sermons on the Christian guidelines, such as Rabbi Leon Modena who, according to Joanna Weinberg ‘chose to model himself on Francesco Panigarola who was one of the most famous preachers of the time [...]’⁵⁰

The examples above provide us with a multifaceted picture of the Jewish society of sixteenth and seventeenth century Italy, which may have implications on our understanding of the concept of ‘conversion’. The act of conversion in this case might not necessarily entail an absolute transition, compared to the alchemical sciences, in which one substance changes into something utterly different by a mysterious process. It might imply the *taking to an extreme* many of one’s previous ideas.

Conclusion

A recent art-historical study on the pulpit of Santa Croce Church, from the period we are concerned with, describes its function in the following terms: ‘Here, in the preaching pulpit of Santa Croce, the preacher in the lower nave would find himself in the midst of his lay listeners; surrounded by the crowds, the pulpit could serve as a virtual theater in the round [...]’.⁵¹ This portrayal echoes one of the opening paragraphs of the sermon on the ‘Divine Sacrifice’, where Vitale describes his Jewish audience as they ‘circle him like a crown’:

What a marvel it will be if now that I’ve climbed up to this pulpit in order to talk things over with you, while you encircle me, indeed in a beautiful and honored crown, in order to listen to me. We will be feeling in our soul mirth, merriness, joy and satisfaction [...].⁵²

We may be tempted to imagine the situation of Vitale Medici, at the Santa Croce Church, with his Jewish audience surrounding him, as a

⁵⁰ Weinberg J., “Preaching in the Venetian Ghetto: The Sermons of Leon Modena”, in Ruderman (ed.) *Preachers of the Italian Ghetto* 122.

⁵¹ Ben-Aryeh Debby N., “The Santa Croce Pulpit in Context: Sermons, Art and Space”, *Artibus et Historiae* 57 (2008) 75–93.

⁵² ‘Che meraviglia sia, se ora, che io sono asceto in questo pulpito per ragionare con esso teo, e too che mi circundi di si bella & onorata corona, per ascoltarmi, habbiamo da sentire nell’animo nostro gaudio, contento, letizia, e gioia [...]’. Medici, *Omelie fatte alli ebrei di Firenze* 28.

virtual theater, in which he displays his rhetorical and oratorical talents. Yet, there is one element missing for the completion of a full image of a theater, which is the audience. We must ask ourselves if the Jews forced to attend Vitale Medici's sermons can be seen as playing the role of an audience in this virtual theater. Judging by the historical documents which we have access to, these sermons only led to a deeper resentment and anger on the part of the Florentine Jews towards their preacher which resulted in violent attacks on Vitale Medici on the part of Jews.⁵³ The violent reaction of the Jews to Vitale Medici's sermons seems to indicate that the aggressive and domineering facets of his sermons exceeded the persuasive and communicative aspects. Although there may be elements of continuity in his conversion, Vitale's Jewish public appears to have reacted to the hostile and discontinuous aspects of his conversion.

Vitale Medici's actual audience is more probable to be found among the readers of the printed sermons, namely the converts to Christianity as well as other Christian readers. For this public Vitale would signify a representative link in the succession of conversionary writings, from Raymond Martin's *Pugio Fidei* and until Paolo Medici's *Catalogue of the Illustrious Neofites*.

⁵³ Renata Segre brings documentation to a case in which Vitale Medici was attacked and hurt in his neck when coming out of the sermon to the Christians on 'Giovedì santo' (probably the one published in his *Omèlie fatte alli ebrei* 83–92). See Segre R., "Il mondo ebraico nei cardinali della Controriforma", in *Italia Judaica: gli Ebrei in Italia dalla segregazione alla prima emancipazione. Atti del III convegno internazionale, Tel-Aviv 15–20 giugno 1986*. (Rome: 1989) 131.

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