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A Tale of Two Piazzas – Rome, Italy

Local personalities: Rabbi Shmuel Alatri & Enrico

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I always believed that the best way to get to know a city is through your feet. I spend my first day in any new city aimlessly wandering the streets with no specific destination in mind, listening to the city's unique soundtrack and trying to feel its pace. In Rome, somewhat like in Jerusalem, I continued to do this long after I had already become familiar with every street and every corner of the center of town. Next to the bustling Piazza Venezia, there is a maze of small, quiet streets. A constant chill is always in the air, because sunlight can barely penetrate the narrow sliver of open space above the tall homes with their crumbling walls. Walking through them requires extreme vigilance in order not to slip on one of the round, smooth cobblestones and so you don't lose your way. Mildew covers the corners of the houses, and the smell of a different era hangs in the air.

American author Anatole Broyard once said that Rome is a poem pressed into service as a city. Rome is a city of surprises – you never know what you will find around the corner: a small piazza adorned by climbing vines, a Baroque-style fountain, the ornate façade of a Renaissance church, or a small, dusty family store selling kitchen utensils or textiles. Next to the center of town is a small piazza featuring a fountain decorated by turtles, from which extends a narrow and intimate alleyway where your footsteps echo. At the end of the alley is my favorite street corner in the city. From the shadows of the alley, you step out into the wide square of the Jewish ghetto of Rome and you are always greeted by the vibrant mayhem of activity. It's a bit like entering the kibbutz dining room or the neighborhood synagogue sanctuary. At the corner of that street, I would always lose the anonymity that I enjoyed in the city's alleyways and immediately become a member of the community. For better or for worse, I was now "Gilad, the *shaliach* from Israel." A noisy rabble of children whom I guided would come out of the school. The community's security guards, whom I worked with on a regular basis, stood in strategic locations and peered warily at the passersby. Friends and acquaintances waved to me, and I greeted parents and colleagues. Over time, I learned about the family stories of the passersby and about the community history that was hidden in the space among the living generation.

There are very few examples of a Jewish community that defines itself so clearly by its physical location the way that the Jews of Rome identify with the "ghetto." Even today, a Roman Jew's level of involvement in the community is measured by the frequency that he visits the "ghetto," and the community members assess the extent to which other members belong to the Jewish community with remarks such as, "I've never seen him at the piazza," or "Who's his father?!" The ghetto is home to the community's offices and many of its institutions, the main synagogue, the Jewish school in Rome, and a few kosher restaurants.

In one of the corners of the ghetto, half-hidden to the eye, is Boccione bakery. Behind its modest façade hides one of the wonders of the Jewish kitchen of Rome. On dented shelves covered in crumbs sit traditional baked goods such as ricotta and sour cherry cake, which is cut with a large knife and melts in your mouth, or Jewish pizza – a sweet almond pastry filled with dried fruit, nuts and other surprises, which is always scorched just a bit too much, comes out hard as a rock, and is grabbed off the large pans the moment it comes out of the oven. The five older sisters who run the aromatic bakery aren't known for their outstandingly courteous service, but patiently standing in the tiny bakery's line is worth the wait.

Another culinary site is located in a nearby alley. The small Sora Margherita restaurant will host you at homely tables and serve you a selection of traditional Roman dishes. Waiters rush by and diners pushing their way between the tables will brush your shoulders due to the crowdedness, as you munch on leaves of "Jewish artichoke" (Carcciofo alla Giudia) that just came out of the bubbling oil. Fried artichoke is a Roman Jewish dish that originated in the ghetto, invented out of scarcity and hunger by the poor families who lived here, which is sold today at a steep price by restaurants throughout the city.

The reality of the ghetto life that existed for about 300 years in this very place is barely discernible now. At the end of the eighteenth century, development of the modern city led to demolition of the narrow alleyways, where basic hygiene and sanitation were impossible. They were replaced by sunny streets and aesthetic blocks of residential buildings that were considered modern at the time. But the Jewish community, which scattered throughout the city, remained loyal to the site. The wide street at the center of the ghetto was closed off to vehicles and became a public square bustling with Jewish life. The Jews of the community refer to it simply as "the piazza," and the "Jews of the piazza" are the Jews whose social lives revolve around the community. The piazza is a social-cultural space just as much as it is a physical location, and belonging to it is more important than the level of a person's religious observance. Essentially, the Jewish community in Rome is not a religious community at all; it's an ethnic-national community. Therefore, it is open to accepting a wide range of Jewish identities – as long as they are connected to the "piazza" in some way.

"The Jews of the piazza," the hard core of the community, are usually traditional in their religious practice, conservative in their social-political opinions, and Zionist in their national opinions. About the Jews of Rome, it has been said that they live like Reform Jews, practice like Conservatives, and have Orthodox leaders: they keep kosher but don't wear a kippah in public; they don't drive on the Sabbath but use their mobile phones; they pray according to an ancient text unique to Roman Jews but attend synagogue mostly on holidays; Many of them earn a living from retail stores. Some trace their family's roots in the city to Jews expelled from Spain who arrived at the end of the fifteenth century, and some can even trace their roots back to the Jewish slaves who reached the city after the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem, two thousand years ago. The Jewish community of Rome has a place of honor in the story of Rome, and many local residents view the Jews as the real Romans, the ones who were always here and didn't arrive in later waves of immigration.

As a result, the Jewish community of Rome, despite the Catholic church's efforts over the years to suppress Jewish practice, does not apologize for its existence, its location, or its way of life.

Yet, in addition to the sense of uniqueness, the Jewish community of Rome is deeply involved in the urban scene. Symbolically, one can say that the history of the Jews in the city revolves around a triangle of three squares that had a decisive impact on the life of the Jews during the past few centuries. The first is the piazza of the ghetto – the square of Jewish life, along with two additional squares where, like "the piazza" of the ghetto, they too constitute not only a physical location, but a cultural and social space of Jewish existence. One is St. Peter's Square in the Vatican. It represents more than anything else the religious oppression led by the church throughout history. The more its influence increased, the more fearful the Jews became of expressing their Judaism in the public areas outside of the ghetto. The second square is Piazza Venezia (Venice Square) – around which are the ruins of ancient Rome's former glory and many of the institutions of government and culture of the modern Italian republic. This is the square that represents the hope, equality, and normalcy that the modern Italian state offered to the Jews. The more its influence increases, the more comfortable the Jews feel expressing their Judaism in public.

These last two squares define the degree of visibility of Jews in the public sphere. For many hundreds of years, the lives of the Jews were shaped by the popes from St. Peter's Square and were limited to the physical and mental space of the Jewish ghetto. Over the past 150 years, Piazza Venezia has been the more influential square when it comes to Jewish existence. St. Peter's Square and Piazza Venezia are two poles pulling in different directions which determine how far the Jews are from "the piazza" of the ghetto. The degree of influence that each of these poles has on the city's Jews is expressed through the lifestyle that they choose for themselves and the degree of closeness that each Roman Jew feels toward the Jewish community. A Jew who feels threatened gets closer to the ghetto; a Jew who feels hopeful can distance themselves from it. However, the nucleus around which Jewish life has always revolved is the community located at "the piazza" of the ghetto.

I would like to mention two people whose lives represent the struggle for Jewish existence between the three squares.

For most of the nineteenth century, Shmuel Alatri led Rome's Jewish community. I never met him, of course, since he passed away 120 years before I first stepped on Roman soil. In all of my years in the city, I never heard of him either – there are no streets named for him, books do not laud his work, and the Jews of Rome do not boast his name. Only recently, a tiny public park was dedicated to him. Shmuel Alatri was apparently the most important Jewish leader in Rome – whom no one remembers, and in contrast with most of the prominent Jewish leaders who were active in the city, he was also born in Rome. When I first encountered his name in a short footnote while I was writing my master's thesis, I envisioned a thick-bearded Jew with a heavy step, walking through the ghetto streets. He is wearing black and has a wide-brimmed hat on his head. On his way to the

synagogue, while attempting to sidestep the sewage flowing through the streets, he exchanges greetings with the underprivileged Jews with whom he grew up, Jews whose fate is currently on his shoulders.

The material found about Alatri online is scarce and scattered, but it is enough to provide a captivating glimpse into the life of a person who was anything but the way I imagined him. Alatri divided his time between the troubles of the dilapidated ghetto in Rome and the halls of the most wealthy and influential people in Europe and in Italy. He was apparently one of the first Jews in the city whose life was shaped by the increase of the symbolic influence of Piazza Venezia and by Italian nationalism. He led the Jewish community for about sixty years, longer than any other Jewish leader over the past hundreds of years. Shmuel Alatri was the person who succeeded in carrying the weight of the Jewish community on his shoulders through the transition from the aggressive reign of the Vatican to the Italian nation-state, and was thus awarded the title "father of the ghetto." For many decades, his very presence represented Jewish existence in the city, yet although he represented the traditional Jews of the ghetto as well, he was not religiously observant himself, and in the only surviving photo of him, he is wearing modern clothing, has a white mustache, and no head covering.

As head of the community, Alatri was in direct, constant contact with the two forces that influenced the lives of the Jews at that time – the popes and the Italian nationalist forces. As a young man, Pope Gregory XVI, who was especially fond of him, nicknamed him "our young Cicero" for his outstanding diplomatic skills. In Rome, Alatri was known for his ingenuity and his financial talents, and he won himself many friends from among the most prominent figures in politics and economy. He was one of the three Jews who served on the city council of Rome during the short national uprising at the end of the 1840s. This did not prevent the pope from inviting him, after reinstating his power, to serve as a member of the board of directors of the papal bank, where he played a central role in saving the bank from a dramatic financial collapse.

Alongside the trust that he earned from the Vatican, Alatri also won the faith of the city's citizens fighting for national independence. When they historically voted in favor of joining the Italian republic, Alatri was among the public representatives who submitted the results of the public referendum to King Victor Emanuel II. He was elected as treasurer of the free city and was a member of the Italian parliament. In one of the only stories that survived about his life, it is told that during a tempestuous meeting of the city council, a proposal was made to take down the cross hanging on the wall of the council's meeting room. This was an expression of the increasing secular attitude in the city during those years. But it was actually Shmuel Alatri, the Jew, who was most vehemently opposed to the idea. Instead of removing the cross, he suggested adding a Star of David. In reaction, they say, the pope himself said that "Alatri is the most Christian of all of the members of Rome's city council." During all of those years of public activity at the Vatican and in the institutions of the Italian republic, Alatri was the leader of the Jewish community and fought for its rights. Toward the end of his life, he was even the one who fought for its reorganization as part

of the new Italian state, and the person behind the plans to demolish the ancient ghetto and improve the quality of life of the Jews.

Shmuel Alatri was an exceptional phenomenon in the world where he grew up. He broke boundaries and consensuses without leaving the ghetto, and with his sharp senses, he knew how to adapt himself to the rules of the game in several parallel worlds. In the ghetto, he was a proud Italian, and outside of it, he was proud of his Judaism. He used his public influence for the benefit of the community and represented it in the finest halls of Italy without feeling any sentiments of inferiority. However, no less than his story testifies to his greatness, his life testifies to the community's ability to accept him.

Indeed, "the piazza" of Rome knows how to accept a range of diverse Jewish lifestyles to this day, without compromising on its principles. I believe that the story of Enrico, another Roman Jew, is one of the best examples of the way that magic can exist in places that facilitate it, and the power that the community has to create such magic.

Enrico was the first person I saw when I landed in Italy for the first time. He came to meet me at the airport and made sure that I safely reached Rome. Over the next years, we shared many moments of intensive work, meaningful talks, educational concerns, and good food. Enrico was and still is one of the most impressive young people I have ever met. He has managed to achieve the perfect balance between classic intellectual and great conversationalist; he is blessed with high emotional intelligence and a sense of deep responsibility, and the ability to integrate a good joke with a quote in fluent Latin.

Enrico's family is Catholic, on both sides. His father, a revolutionary personality in his youth, decided to convert. He did so with the seriousness reserved for spiritual people who fall in love with a philosophical idea and then encounter its physical expression in reality. He fell in love with the idea of a nation without a homeland, a nation whose essence is an ancient tradition, who have survived for thousands of years with willpower and faith, and he decide to join them. Enrico's mother converted after him and for him, but never fully internalized the fact that she became a Jew. While Enrico's father lived as an Orthodox Jew, due to the differences in background, culture, and personality he never became a full member of the Jewish "piazza." He lived his life as a modern Orthodox Jew even after he became one of the leading sociologists in Italy, and despite being detached from Jewish community life, he was more careful about religious observance than most of the "piazza Jews."

On Friday night, Enrico's father would sit with him and teach him fundamental Jewish ideas and a bit of Hebrew. There was no coercion at home regarding observing the commandments; rather Enrico's father would provide explanations about their inner meaning with deep conversations about Jewish philosophy. However, Enrico's parents enrolled him at a public school and not at the Jewish school at the "piazza." Thus, he grew up as the only Jew in his surroundings, without a connection to the Jewish community. With a Jewish father, atheist mother, large extended Catholic family, and no community, Enrico struggled for years to explain to himself and to those around him exactly who he was.

Until one day, he fell in love. It was immediate, complete, and total love, and it hit him so forcefully that it shook him. It happened not (only) because of a girl, but (mainly) because of questions. At the age of 14, he joined a Jewish Zionist youth movement. There, he later told me, "I was asked the right questions for the first time in my life." These were questions about identity, belonging, and purpose. For the first time in his life, he was in an environment that accepted him the way he was – with a unique story, but not an impossible one. For the first time, he belonged to a community that sparked his mind and allowed him to freely express who he was. He was fully drawn into the movement and developed a completely different Jewish identity than that of his father, a secular identity based on culture, history, and nationality. "Over the years, I realized," Enrico told me, "that this community of people who I met is what connected me to Judaism." His father found Judaism through faith but did not find a community for himself; Enrico found his Judaism through community, even without the faith.

Through the movement, for the first time, he met children who grew up in "the piazza." It was love at first sight – he opened up new ways of thinking to them, and they brought him into the fold of the secret of the existence of organic Jewish life, the kind based on family Sabbath meals, a gaggle of aunts and uncles and cousins around a Sabbath table, and visits to "the piazza." It wasn't just intellectual study anymore. "A regular Jew is born in a community and searches for his own path outside of it," Enrico said to me. "I was born outside of the community and all I wanted was to find a path into it." The community that he found through the movement gave him the freedom to talk about his unique background in a Jewish setting, and the power to be proud of his Judaism in non-Jewish settings. In this way, Enrico is a clear result of the symbolic power of Piazza Venezia, which enables Jews to feel comfortable with their Judaism anywhere.

Like in Alatri's case, Enrico's life was also shaped by the willingness of the Jewish community to accept a range of Jewish identities, as long as they maintain some form of connection with "the piazza." Alatri was born into the community and searched for his way out; Enrico was born outside of the community and searched for a way in. He also became active in other educational frameworks in the community, broadening his familiarity with his inner world and allowing the community to broaden its familiarity with him. Many of the choices that he made in his life, he confessed, were spurred by his fear of losing this connection, the concern that "everything would suddenly be over," and the desire to continue to strengthen the Jewish aspect of his life.

In contrast with many cities in the world, if you're a Jewish traveler in Rome, you won't need to search for the Jewish community for very long. It's always there, in "the piazza" of the ghetto. Between your visit to Piazza Venezia and your visit to the Vatican, find the time to sit on a shaded bench next to Boccione bakery, and remember to ask yourselves whether you are looking from within your community outward, or looking at your community from the outside.