

EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

Volume 3: Gender, Family, and Social Structures, 2006, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT

Introduction to Shem Tov Soporto

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Notes: For a fuller discussion, see my "The Knotty Problem of Yom Tov Soporto," *Italia* 13-15 (2001): 137-51, in *Memory of Josef Sermoneta*.

The Jewish Community of Rome was unimpressed. It wanted it made clear that one did not make accusations that could harm the well-being, in fact, mostly financial, but also the honor, of young women. Indeed, the bride Ricca was herself awarded what amounted to a hefty fine; we know that among Christians, it was the father's honor that was considered impugned, and any monetary sanctions would go to him. Not here.

Finally, we learn something about sacred and profane. Shem Tov approached a Christian for the rather crude cure. Christians in similar situations normally went to priests, considering the curse and the surrounding issues matters of holiness. We also learn that on everyday levels, there was considerable interchange between Jews and Christians. The events take place just five years before Rome's ghetto was instituted by Pope Paul IV, but even in the ghetto period—which endured for three hundred years—such interactions would have been highly probable.

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Shem Tov Soporto Notaries, 16th century

Translated by Kenneth Stow, Haifa University, Israel

Notes: For a fuller discussion, see my "The Knotty Problem of Yom Tov Soporto," *Italia* 13-15 (2001): 137-51, in *Memory of Josef Sermoneta*.

1.

9 June 1550

Source: F.7, l.1, f.154r-v.

Engagement contract

Jehudah di Rabbi Giuseppe ben Feisat (? , ibn Passat) engages his daughter Ricca to Yom Tov q.m Isach Soporto. The wedding will be held after Succoth; the dowry is 175 sc. (all in money, [no goods, as was usual for about half of it]); and the *tosefet* (the wife's additional jointure in the marriage contract, which is strictly hers and which she devolves upon her heirs) is 50 sc. If Ricca dies without an heir, 75 sc. will be returned to Jehudah; if Yom Tov dies, Ricca receives the full 225 sc. Yom Tov may never take a second wife. The witness is Rabbi Benedetto Forti (Hazaq).

Note: the reference to a second wife surely refers to a second wife during the marriage, should Ricca fail to produce a child within ten years. On rare occasions Jews were permitted this privilege; see Howard Adelman, "Servants and Sexuality: Seduction, Surrogacy, and Rape: Some Observations concerning Class, Gender, and Race in Early Modern Italian Jewish Families," *Gender and Judaism, The Transformation of Tradition*, ed. Tamar Rudavsky (New York, 1995), 88. This happened two or three times during the sixteenth century in Rome, but the Pope himself had to give explicit permission; it also happened after 15 years of marriage.

2.

5 January 1551

Source: F.7, l.1, ff.187v-188v..

Testimony of twelve witnesses

Moise Cohen di Ancona, living in Rome testified that, "on the street called Bank Street, I met Shem Tov q.m Isach Soporto, and I asked him where he he had gone, since I had not seen him for a number of days. Shem Tov answered that he had celebrated his *huppah*, [wedding, *nozze*] but he had been "tied," until the third night, when he was cured by an old man, to whom he gave a few coins. After having labored for two nights, he at last was able to do the job. He was happy and in good spirits, thank God." Haim Anubo di Moise of Rome testified that fifteen days ago, at the exit of the Sabbath, he was in the house of Shem Tov, "and Shem Tov told him: 'Do you not know what happened to me?' . . . He had been "tied," and he could not [take his wife's] virginity. Shem Tov recounted that 'he had been tied by a [close] friend, whom he would never have suspected. The knot was undone by a goi, who led him to the river where there was a ladder made out of millstones, and there [he had Shem Tov] urinate following instructions. And he was healed, and on that very night, he took [qiniti] his wife.'" Mrs. Orabona, wife of Moise Abdon: "On the Sabbath, she was in the home of Bentsivenuta, widow q.m Isach Soporto, "with many other women, and she saw a garment soiled with the blood of the *betullim* (virginity), which some of the female relatives of Shem Tov Soporto were showing off. [And the women there were saying:] May it be God's will that so it should be with all our daughters and the daughters of all the daughters of Israel." Stella, wife of Giacobbe di Lattes, repeated [Orabona's] testimony, [adding only] that the women first said: "there is no need to show it, because your word is beyond doubt; so may it be with all the daughters of Israel." Diamante, the wife of Natan, said that Bensivenuta had come down and said: "If you care about me, please come upstairs, because my son has 'bought the *zapahioth* (lit., honey pot: deflowered his bride)' tonight."

They indeed went upstairs and were shown the gown. And Bentsivenuta said: here is the garment which gained for my [kallah] (son's bride) her *zapahioth* ("honey pot"). Perna, the widow q.m Moise Spizzichino, reported that on Saturday, they went into the house, where "they found a small boy by the name of Moise, son of Mrs. Bensivenuta, and he told them: 'Good news!' And Mrs. Bentsivenuta said: 'Here is the honor of my daughter-in-law. The gossipers had their say, but her honor was intact [lit., found.]' And she said loudly, joyously, and with high spirits: 'Look everybody, my son was "knotted," but he is cured.'" Allegrizza, wife of Sabato Spizzichino, testified that Bensivenuta said: "Here is the honor of my daughter-in-law. The gossips wagged their tongues [and said], but her honor was intact." Stella, wife of Pinhas the Masqil, told how Bentsivenuta went behind the bed and found a stain on the bedsheet. Stella, the wife of Abramo Di Sessa, concurred; as did Ricca, the wife of Efraim Corcos. Graziosa, wife of Raffaele di Sezze, states the same. Gemma, the elderly widow q.m Giuseppe di Bonanno, said [that before Saturday evening] she had gone to see if Ricca was *scoperchiata* ("her lid was off"). It was not; Ricca was a virgin. "So she asked Shem Tov if he had come to her [in the way of

a husband], and if he had touched [had intercourse with] her. He replied that he had. To which she retorted: 'You came to her? Certainly not.' The next day, they called her [again]. And Shem Tov told her 'that now he knew that this was from God, for "they laid down [or had gone quiet]" on him [his genitals].' Gemma was again called on Saturday, the next day, that is, . . . and they showed her a robe soiled with the blood of (betulin,) and she" also saw the [bloody] sheet, although "she herself said she did not need to see it, because, praise God, she did not have an evil tongue."

Note: on the subject of the "knot," see among others, Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "L'aiguillette," *Le territoire de l'historien* (Paris, 1973), 136-149, J. Bazaq, *Beyond the Senses*, in Hebrew (Tel Aviv, 1968), 52-56, and K. Stow, *Alienated Minority, The Jews of Medieval Latin Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 136, esp. on the subject of millstones; and on rituals of popular healing in general, throwing light on the specific phenomenon discussed here, see Peter Burke, "Rituals of Healing in Early Modern Italy," *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), 212-14. What is striking in this episode, apart from the broader issue of the accusation originally made that the bride was not a virgin, which, as the text below shows, was treated with utmost severity by the community, is that the Jewish "victim" of the hex turns to a Christian, whereas a Christian would, at least theoretically, have turned only to a priest. Whether this says that on the level of folk-beliefs, Jews did not distinguish between Jew and Christian, or that the Jewish establishment did not take such matters seriously, is simply beyond speculation. However, there is no argument that such hexes were accepted as fact by the Jews.

Additionally, there is the elaborate public demonstration of the bride's virginity, although this scenario is unparalleled throughout the *Notai ebrei*, including the course phrase about being *scoperchiata*, which may have some relevance regarding the average Jewish cultural level and degree of acculturation in everyday matters. One may perhaps suggest that this demonstration--clearly ritualized, as the responses of the witnesses indicate--was necessary only in the unlikely case that the bride was accused of not being a virgin. This was also a world of women, the elderly or the widowed in particular, yet with the central actor being the mother-in-law of the bride. Was she protecting the honor of her *kallah* (bride) or her son? Or of both? However, such women were also the principal witnesses in the many cases of *miqre bilti tahor*, an improper event," meaning (accidental, but rarely, if ever, suspicious) vaginal bleeding And there, too, what they witnessed was blood on a *haluq* (robe). Accordingly, one may begin to suspect that those cases, which have an air of being something else disguised, perhaps abuse, perhaps violence, were really what they pretended to be. Or, given their exceedingly large number, suggesting that the issue truly was not pierced hymens, they portray a deeply imbedded fear for the loss of virginity and a feeling that socially this loss was almost irremediable. Hence, no matter how slight the doubt, it was necessary in cases of a *miqre bilti tahor* to protect the (marital) future of the bleeding child.

What made virginity so central is the next question; but here, the answers cease. To be sure, the term was always included in the marriage contract. But technical terms and reality are very often not consonant. Had Jews begun to view virginity as something more than a guarantee of a physical state and thus of the certainty of future paternity? Had they been influenced by complex Christian attitudes that viewed virginity as a spiritual virtue, as well as a corporeal one? If so, centuries of Jewish tradition about the body had been considerably modified. More evidence is thus called for before carrying this discussion forward.

3.

7 January 1551

Source: F.7, l.1, ff.188v-189r.

Summons and response

Shem Tov di q.m Isach Soporto is summoned to have his case heard. "The Rabbis, judges, and arbiters, in the presence of Rabbi Giacobbe Recanati, discussed Shem Tov's claim of 'an open passageway.' [He is told to bring witnesses, but he refuses, saying] that he has given up the claim and that he is satisfied . . . and they should reach a decision."

Note: the gravity of the case, in which every possible jurisdictional unit in the Jewish community became involved. Soporto folded, of course, because his defeat was a matter of open record by now, especially once the testimony of the women in no. 1089 had been taken--by these same judges, to be sure. He must have hoped that giving up the case would reduce the penalty that was sure to come. Apparently, see no. 1092, below, it did not reduce it.

4.

17 January 1551

Source: F.7, l.1, f.189v.

Decision of arbiters

The Crier Sabato, called Goroba[?] sent notice to all the synagogues, that they should announce two decisions, one in Ancona, where Rabbi Giuseppe Ibn Passat, father of the bride Ricca lives, and a second, which is to remain in Rome in the hands of Mazliah di Ceprano. Shem Tov [Soporto] is to pay 100 sc. of "pure silver" [meant figuratively] as a *tosefet*. Then, on the Shabbath, at 21 hours [in the afternoon before the Sabbath was out, that is, according to the way time was counted then] in the *Kenesset He-Heikhal Ha-neherav*. (The Scola Tempio, but using its full name: the Synagogue of the Destroyed Temple [in Jerusalem]) before the Wider Council of Sixty (of the Roman Jewish Community), Shem Tov said that he accepted the decision and would turn to his father-in-law to ask forgiveness. The witness is the Illustrious Councilor, Obadiah di Joab.

Note: the *tosefet* is now fifty percent greater than it originally was (see above no. 1), a most severe penalty, not to mention its publicity. We should not, however, think that honor and money per se are being crassly equated. Rather, it is specifically a large *tosefet* that indicates social position and honor. As an aside, we learn the Scola Tempio's actual name and its origin.

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