THE SYNAGOGUE OF CHERASCO

An Interpretation and Guide

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Let us Imagine

When, in the name of liberty and equality, aristocratic heads began rolling in Paris, when the king of the mightiest nation in Europe was dethroned, Terror began spreading throughout France, and armies clashed on Piedmontese soil – in the autumn of the year 1792 – a modest, happy event took place amidst the small band of Jewish families in Cherasco.

The brothers **Nathan-Donato** and **Avraham-Abramo** De Benedetti gathered their families, in-laws and associates – ten families in all – to celebrate the installation of a new **washbasin** at the entrance to the prayer hall of the little synagogue, on the top floor of the ghetto building.

How much did the De Benedettis, Lattes and Segres who assembled on that day know about the dramatic world events happening outside the ghetto? Did they hope for the triumph of revolutionary republican France, the liberator of the oppressed, which had just granted civic rights to its Jews? Did they view it through the Messianic prism of national redemption? Or were they apprehensive of the coming changes, given the bloody turn things were taking inside France? Did they intuit that the end of civic restrictions

would inevitably lead to the end of their small community? Or, more immediately, what would be the impact of provisioning and housing the conqueror's troops? How did war affect business? Were they feeling more or less secure, more or less hopeful?

Donato had been *capofamiglia* for the past c. 20 years, ever since the death of his father **Raffaele**. His household in the ghetto had numbered nine souls in 1787, but by 1789 it was reduced to seven – perhaps he lost two of his children, perhaps his unmarried sister **Abigail** had died. His youngest son, **Emilio David**, six years old at the time of the washbasin dedication, was born when his father was 44, and we can imagine Donato as an indulgent, maybe doting, father to this surviving son.

When he was in his late thirties, Donato had married a woman 16 years his junior, **Telza Segre** of Moncalvo. Why the late marriage? Was it because he had no means to support a family earlier, or because of the crowded living conditions in the ghetto? Did he have to wait until his parents died? Or was there a scarcity of suitable girls?

Now he was a man of substantial life experience and responsibility. He had taken care of father and mother in their old age, of an unmarried, perhaps unwell, sister, had witnessed deaths in the family. Through all this, he had built up the business to become, eventually, one of the major taxpayers in the town and the pillar of his little community.

Not least among his achievements was his relationship with his brother **Abramo**. There was a 13 years age gap between the two brothers. When Abramo was six, Donato was an adult of 19, residing in Asti with Benaya DB (1758), a year later at Alessandria, two years later in Torino. Little Abramo could look up to his big brother when he came home to visit at Cherasco, and big brother Donato could be playful and fatherly with little Abramo. There would be no sibling rivalry between these two.

For this life-long bond, we have solid proof. The brothers lived in one household and conducted their business together, in cooperation and trust, with Donato gradually making room, as he aged, for Abramo's ascendance and dynamism. Abramo extended the family's business from the traditional, restrictive moneylending to silk manufacturing, textile trade, and other ventures. We even get a glimpse of his physique: *e' alto 162 m…, fronte alta, mento rotondo, viso ovale di colorito naturale.* (BrunoTaricco, *Gli Ebrei di Cherasco*, p. 191).

Both brothers were **third-generation ghetto** men, who, like their father, had **known no other life**. It was their grandfather **Emilio** DB (born 1686), who

underwent the forced ghettoization of Piedmont Jews in 1724 – a distant memory by now, especially for Abramo.

Given that everywhere else in Italy Jews had been living in ghettos for more than 200 years, and where they were not restricted to closed ghettos, they nonetheless tended to form their own neighborhoods, this event could not have come as a great shock to Grandpa Emilio. We must not regard it through the trauma of Nazi ghettoization in the 20th century. In fact, it had its positive side: after centuries of expulsions from country to country, city to city, interspersed with occasional mob attacks on Jewish individuals and dwellings, here, finally, was an acceptance of sorts, a permanent arrangement, a form of tolerance. One could invest in the embellishment of a synagogue, for example, without fear of having to abandon it.

For Emilio's grandsons, ghetto life was a matter of course, a given; if they looked up and down the map of Europe, they would find very few places where Jews were living any better – maybe in Amsterdam, maybe in London. Much worse than humiliation, which is merely a state of mind, and one that Jews had learned to deal with over the centuries, were the crowded lodgings, the sheer inconvenience and constant irritation of having to share tight space with so many others. In the 20th century, we learned that "L'Enfer c'est les autres". In the 18th century ghetto, even the shadow of this nihilistic observation was unthinkable. Living with others had to be turned into a source of strength, not of contention and misery.

How can this be achieved? Only by strong, wise leadership.

The Washbasin

Putting aside the worries of the moment, Donato and Abramo directed attention to the matter at hand. There was much for which to give thanks to God. It was Donato's 50th birthday.

Family and friends assembled, dressed in clothes customary to that place and time, perhaps better dressed than most, given that they were in the fabric industry and trade. A small ceremony took place. Not an "unveiling" as we are accustomed to do today, rather, a more traditional Jewish event.

A Jewish event would consist of some "words of Torah" appropriate for the occasion. Someone in the community who was sufficiently learned was given the honor of expounding the verse on the plaque, or some other verse that had to do with water, or the reasons behind the commandment to wash one's hands before entering the prayer hall. If it was Donato's birthday, the

speaker might search for something appropriate in the Torah portion that Donato had learned for his *bar-mitzvah*. He could bring some give-and-take among the Talmudic Sages, or interpretations by famous Biblical exegetes, or, very likely, some story to fire up the imagination of the kids. The speaker had the greatest freedom to roam around in whatever Jewish writings he fancied, to weave and embroider any type of cloth that would edify and hearten his hearers.

He could, for example, draw from the Mishnah (the early layer, or the core, of the Talmud, c. 2-3 century CE) a detailed description of the joyous folk ceremony known as the "Rejoicing of the Place of the Water-Drawing (*beit ha-sho'evah*)", which took place during the Festival of Succoth, when the Jerusalem Temple was flooded with pilgrims. The section begins with the grandiose words: "He who has not witnessed the rejoicings of the water-drawing has, throughout the whole of his life, witnessed no real rejoicing!"

At the expiration of the first holiday of the festival they descended into the women's court, where a great transformation was made. Golden candelabra were placed there, with four golden basins at the top of each; and four ladders were put to each candelabrum, on which stood four lads from the rising youth of the priesthood, holding jars of oil containing 120 jugs, with which they replenished each basin.

The cast-off breeches and belts of the priests were torn into shreds for wicks, which they lighted. There was not a court in Jerusalem that was not illuminated by the lights of the water-drawing. Pious and distinguished men danced before the people with

lighted flambeaux in their hands, and sang hymns and lauds before them; and the Levites accompanied them with harps, psalteries, cymbals, and numberless musical instruments. On the fifteen steps, which led into the women's court, corresponding with the fifteen songs of degrees, stood the Levites, with their musical instruments, and sang. At the upper gate, which leads down from the court of the Israelites to the court of the women, stood two priests, with trumpets in their hands. When the cock first crowed they blew a blast, a long note, and a blast. This they repeated when they reached the tenth step, and again (the third time) when they got into the court. They went on, blowing their trumpets as they went, until they reached the gate that leads out to the east…

The Mishnah tells us that even venerable leaders, such as the learned Rabban Simeon ben Gameliel (whom Christians remember kindly from the Acts of the Apostles), performed juggling feats for the crowd.

I bring this nostalgic description, probably written at a time when only stray foxes stalked the Temple's ruined remains, to illustrate a point that recurs throughout this synagogue visit: in every possible way, the **memory of those glorious, happy days** was kept alive for generations, in every Jewish heart, wherever Jews assembled.

After the chosen "words of Torah", whatever they may have been, the brothers Donato and Abramo were no doubt thanked, maybe they responded modestly. Little Emilio was given the privilege of being the first to turn the little faucet that lets out the water. Then they all went in for evening prayers. The women and girls, exempt from daily prayers, went down the narrow external steps to their respective apartments to prepare supper.

Why a marble tablet?

An old water container was replaced by a new one, proper drainage was provided for the refuse water. Did this necessitate an expensive stone tablet? Surely, the little

congregation could have made do with the solution found at Carmagnola: a painted fancy of a splashing fountain, *e basta*.

Naturally, there is a sound practical reason: where there is water, you want to protect the wall from humidity.

But this plaque is much more than the minimum required for that practical purpose. This plaque tells us something about (1) the bond between two brothers, (2) the dual nature of philanthropy, (3) the proper way to live, and (4) Jewish tradition and hope.

Let us examine these elements.

In the tablet's first line, hovering as a crown over the entire message, is the elegant two-word announcement: *Nidvat ha-achim* – **Offering** [of the] **brothers**. In the Bible, the word *nedava [here in genitive form: nidvat*] always describes a **freewill** offering to God. A joint gift, then, a gift of two men of one mind, who have decided freely to make an offering to God, or in the service of God.

The second line gives us **the names**: First, Nathan, then Avraham, **Baruch**. Their names are preceded by an abbreviated three-letter **honorific**, something like "honored teacher(s), Rabbi(s) Nathan and Abraham." This sounds a bit strange – two businessmen-bankers decide to crown themselves with an honorific that is generally reserved for rabbis and teachers, when they themselves are neither. I assume that this title was used because in traditional Judaism, there was no other honorific. **Nothing could be more honorable** than being a teacher/scholar/rabbi. A little vanity enters here, but maybe the plaque just would not have "looked right", if the names were stripped of any formula of respect.

More generally, we must acknowledge that every name-bearing plaque is evidence of some **vanity**. But not only. There is also a desire to **stamp the act of giving** in the memory of a community, and of one's descendants. Not only to be remembered in the best possible light, in the moment when our noblest self-image found beautiful expression, but also as a **lesson and example**. Let others see, let the children learn – give freely, support your fellows and your community. Freedom goes with responsibility, generosity with fellowship.

Next come two lovely lines, a fine example of what all culture should be: drawing on the past to enrich, beautify and make meaningful the present. Taking a well-known verse from the Book of Psalms (26:6) that has to do with hand-washing – in the metaphorical sense – they placed it above a real washbasin: I will wash mine hands in innocency: so will I compass thine altar, O LORD: (King James Version). The verse is understood to mean that

once a person is clean of all evildoing, when he leads a life of honesty and justice, he may approach God.[1] For a businessman, especially for a banker, this was a declaration of probity. This is the **single most important thing** the brothers DB wished people to know about them.

In the process, with all due respect to Holy Scripture, they took the liberty of "improving" the verse, just a bit, carefully. The chief characteristic of Biblical poetry is its structure: two parallel parts in each verse to express the central idea in similar, but different, words and metaphors. Biblical poetry does not generally rhyme.

Clearly, these 18th century Italians had their taste in poetry, whether from what they knew of Italian literature, or from R. Moshe Haim Luzzato, or from the tradition of Spanish Hebraic Medieval poetry, or the Hebrew prayer book. They did not hesitate to impose their aesthetic tastes on the religious experience. Rhymes, for example, must have seemed more elegant, more cultured, more Italian, or maybe just easier to commit to memory.

Bear with me for a moment and try to follow:

In order to get a pretty rhyme, the local poet took from the Psalm the two sets of three words each (a total of six words, running on one line) and divided them into two lines, as in a modern poem. He picked out the most important and strongest word in the first set: *nikayon* (purity, cleanliness, which, in the Psalm, appears in the middle of the first three words), and moved it to the end of the line. Now he needed a rhyming word from the second part of the verse, but there was none. Moreover, the word sitting at the end of the second line was God's ineffable name, the YHWH letters – you certainly cannot use THAT for a rhyme. So, he replaced God's unutterable name with an elegant substitute, namely *elyon*, the Most High, Altisssimo. Et Voila!

Psalm 26, 6:

אֶרְחַץ בְּנִקָּיוֹן כַּפָּי ; וַאֲסֹבְבָה אֶת-מִזְבַּחֲךָ יְהוָה

De Benedetti version:

אֶרְחַץ כַּפָּי בְּנִקָּיוֹן ;
וַאֲסֹבְבָה אֶת-מִזְבַּחֲךָ עֶלְיוֹן

[1] Whoever wrote the Gospels, was surely familiar with this Jewish expression, and made Pontius Pilate perform the famous hand-washing act. If Pilate performed it, it was a cynical and theatrical gesture, but, more likely, a Roman governor had no knowledge of it, nor any need for it.

The result is not only a statement that is well suited for the moment of washing the hands, but for the entire prelude to entering the synagogue. Since community members may have been familiar not only with this verse, but with the entire Psalm 26, they would also hear in their mind's ears other uplifting verses and feel that they were entering the "House of God". Verse 8 of Psalm 26 reads: LORD, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth.

This was a **perfect choice** for the plaque.

Washing the hands

No doubt, in or above the basin there would have been a **ceremonial jug**, usually with two handles, that would have served the congregants for pouring water first on the one hand, then on the other, while saying the relevant blessing. For the hand-washing was, of course, ritual; hygiene *per se* was not the prime consideration.

The washbasin is mentioned in Exodus 30, 17-21, in a severe admonishment to Aaron the priest "and his descendants for the generations to come":

"Make a bronze basin…Place it between the tent of meeting and the altar… Aaron and his sons … Whenever they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die… "

Later on, in the Talmud, this requirement, as all the others associated with the by-then destroyed Temple, was transposed into washing one's hands before prayer, and not only for *kohanim*, the descendants of priests, but for all members of the community.

Some plaques over synagogue washbasins I have seen on the internet carry the verse from Exodus 30, as above. The Cherasco community, whose members did not include any *kohanim*, and perhaps did not like the threat of death either, chose a more **upbeat and universally relevant** statement.

I have discussed the plaque only. As far as the basin itself is concerned, B. Taricco wrote (p. 146) that it resembles two others executed in Cherasco churches at about the same time, one in the Madonna delle Grazie, the other, a bit older, at S. Pietro.

The date

The dedicatory marble plaque is the only object in the synagogue that bears a date. The year in the Jewish calendar, appearing in the last line, is 5553

since the creation of the world, that is – between September 17, 1792 and September 6, 1793.

To the delight of children and adults alike, the speaker on the imaginary dedication ceremony described earlier might also have cited this little discussion in the Talmud: Why, asked our Sages, does the forward "leg" of *gimmel* ג stretch out toward *dalet* ד (the fourth letter of the alphabet, its neighbor to its left?), as though it were running after it? Answer: because the word for **charity** starts with a *gimmel*, and the word for **poor** starts with a *dalet*. Hence, the dispenser of charity must run after the poor, and not vice versa.

More about Hebrew letters and calligraphy – later.

The Synagogue Interior

Three dimensions of a synagogue

The synagogue is a place where three realities are conjured up to coexist alongside, and within, each other:

1. **The present**, the one we see around us, with its furnishings and decorations, its ritual instruments and functional furniture, refined or rough, exotic or plain, according to the tastes and means of its founders, today meticulously restored by scholarly experts and artisans, aided by modern technology. The present, the real, the material, albeit with its historical and social context.

2. **The past,** the glorious era that is evoked in almost every Jewish prayer and ceremony, when the God of Israel was worshipped by His priests and people in the Temple of Jerusalem. Virtually every feature of a synagogue echoes this past moment of God's presence among His people in the House that He had chosen to make His "dwelling". Every synagogue is (or was) an attempt to create a spiritual replica of that great Original, an ever-faithful "lieu de memoir".

3. **The future**, the Messianic Age, the time of personal and national redemption, the Kingdom of God. This was often evoked in a mystical dimension: the service of God, as it was performed in the Temple in Jerusalem, was imagined as being replicated by the angels in heaven, who attend upon His glorious throne – the ultimate intent and hope of His seekers.

Many of these allusions exist in every synagogue, while some, especially of the third dimension, the mystical-Messianic, are more common in communities that had an affinity to Kabbalah.

This is one way of looking at the synagogue.

Another way, and not contradictory, is to see these four walls as the space, the only space, where a Jewish public could exercise its **spiritual and ethical autonomy**, where a Jew could feel free.

This little synagogue is a relic from the age of faith, when the Jewish world still turned on its own axis. In Italy, as elsewhere, Jews were subjected to permanent discrimination and to periodic persecutions, but in their beliefs and practices they did not internalize these humiliations, they rejected the gentiles' view of them, knowing it to be false. This **internal freedom**, the adherence to one's own values, the cultivation of one's own culture – a heroic posture, surely, under the circumstances – is especially moving in a community that is so small, so entirely dependent on its own spiritual resources.

Let us begin the visit, with particular **attention to the second element above,** the one that most faithfully reflects tradition and is the very core of the synagogue experience – a place where the Jew recreates a past reality to which he longs to return. This return, of course, is not to the fractious, corrupt reality of ancient Judea, against which the Prophets thundered, but to a better, purified, ideal version, where God's people live in harmony with His precepts of justice and goodness, and for which they are rewarded with independence and bounty in the land of His promise.

Before entry

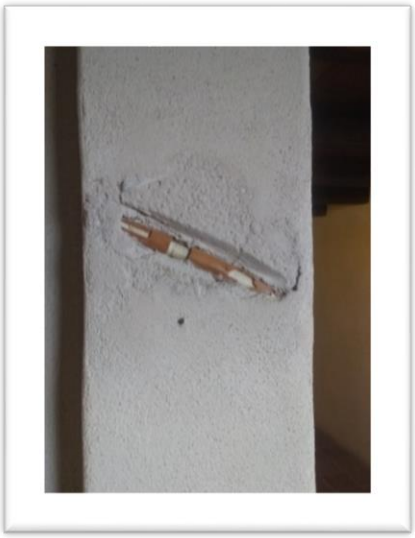
Every synagogue should have two doors by which it is accessed – one from the outside, and another from inside the building.

This is of course logical and necessary in most buildings, but already here, there is an opportunity to evoke the Temple. The book of Proverbs (8, 34) reads: Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. (KJV)

The Talmudic Sages, with a sharp ear for every nuance in the biblical verses, heard correctly the plural in "gates" and "doors", hence – not one, but two doors for entrance to the Temple/synagogue.

Naturally, the entrance we use today, from Via Marconi, is not the original one used in the days of the ghetto, when access from the street was barred. The only access was from within the ghetto building, through the balconies and corridors connecting the various apartments, threading up to this nest at the top of the tree. A far cry from the magnificent Temple in the heart of God's Holy City – the image that was forever bright and fresh in the mind's eye of every Jew.

Mezuzah - doorpost



And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: [7] And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up… [9] And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. (Deuteronomy 6, 6-9, KJV)

If you are wondering why the *mezuzah* is placed on the doorpost of the schoolroom and not on the doorpost of the prayer hall, the answer is right there: "write them upon the posts of thy **house**", that is, your living space, not your public space. No need for a *mezuzah* in a synagogue. The schoolroom, however, was a matter of debate among rabbis. On the one hand, it's not a home; on the other hand, kids and teachers spend many hours there, and probably also eat there, so it's like a home. Most rabbis thought a *mezuzah* was unnecessary for a schoolroom, in Cherasco they differed. Perhaps in previous generations, the little room housed occasional guests, who had no other place to sleep in the crowded ghetto, thus turning it into a "house", requiring a *mezuzah*.

The *mezuzah*, which refers both to the doorpost and, by extension, to the object placed on the doorpost, consists of a piece of parchment rolled in a narrow small case. The parchment is handwritten by quill in black ink by a professional Torah scribe and bears the verses from Deuteronomy 6, 4-9, which include the prayer Shema Yisrael ("Hear, O Israel, the LORD (is) our God, the LORD is One"). It contains a concise formulation of what is required of a Jew: to love God, to believe only in Him, to keep His commandments, and to pass this to one's children.

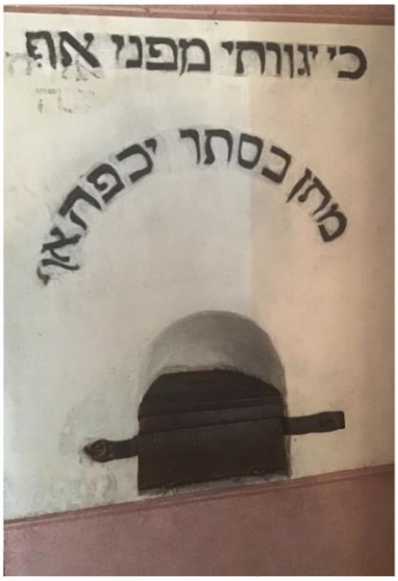
The *mezuzah* is proof that the inhabitants of a house or apartment are Jews, as it was proof at the time of the tenth, most terrible, plague of Egypt, when

God commanded the Hebrews to mark their doorposts, so that He would "pass over" their homes as He smote the eldest born Egyptian sons.

Over the years, it has assumed the character of an **amulet**, as though the mere affixing of God's words to the doorpost were a protection against evil. Some people kiss the *mezuzah* as they enter and leave a house. The health authorities warn that this is not hygienic.

The parchment, if it still exists inside the casing on the Cherasco schoolroom doorpost, looks like this (from the internet). It would probably be considered "unkosher" today, like the one below, because certain letters are erased, or smudged.

The Alms Box



This was placed at the entrance, either outside or inside the prayer room, or both. Many writings, in the Bible and in all other Jewish commentaries for over two millennia, speak of the care for the less fortunate.

The presence of the alms box in the synagogue, besides being practical, is also a reference to the order that prevailed in the Temple. The Mishnah (Tractate Shekalim, page 15) tells us that there used to be in the Temple a "**chamber of secrecy**," where people gave charity anonymously. This delicate arrangement, which respects the dignity of the needy, leans on the verse in the Book of Proverbs (21:14): "A gift in secret pacifies anger". The name of such a box, and of such giving, is exactly what the inscription above the box in Cherasco tells us: Box for a gift in secret. Nothing more. Nothing about "pacifies anger" – which appears over the alms box in Carmagnola (below), for example, together with another verse from Deuteronomy 9:19 that mentions not only God's "anger", but also his "wrath". Even the Carmagnolesi left out the "wrath" part, and made do with "anger."

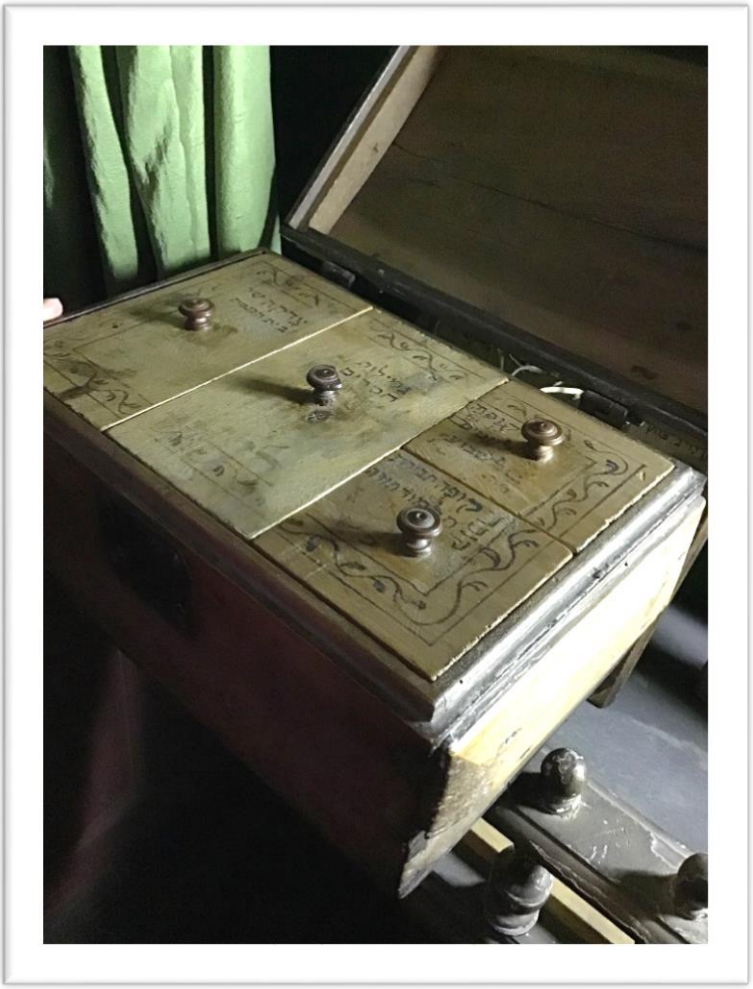
Maybe this is a demonstration of the Cherasco community's generally **upbeat spirit** that they omitted negativities such as anger, let alone wrath, in the belief that secret charity should be given for other, better, reasons.

You will note that this arrangement for giving secretly is in contrast to the spirit of the plaque over the washbasin, which celebrates the names of the donors in big letters. I would say: both forms of giving, secret and public, have their value.

Fundraising tips

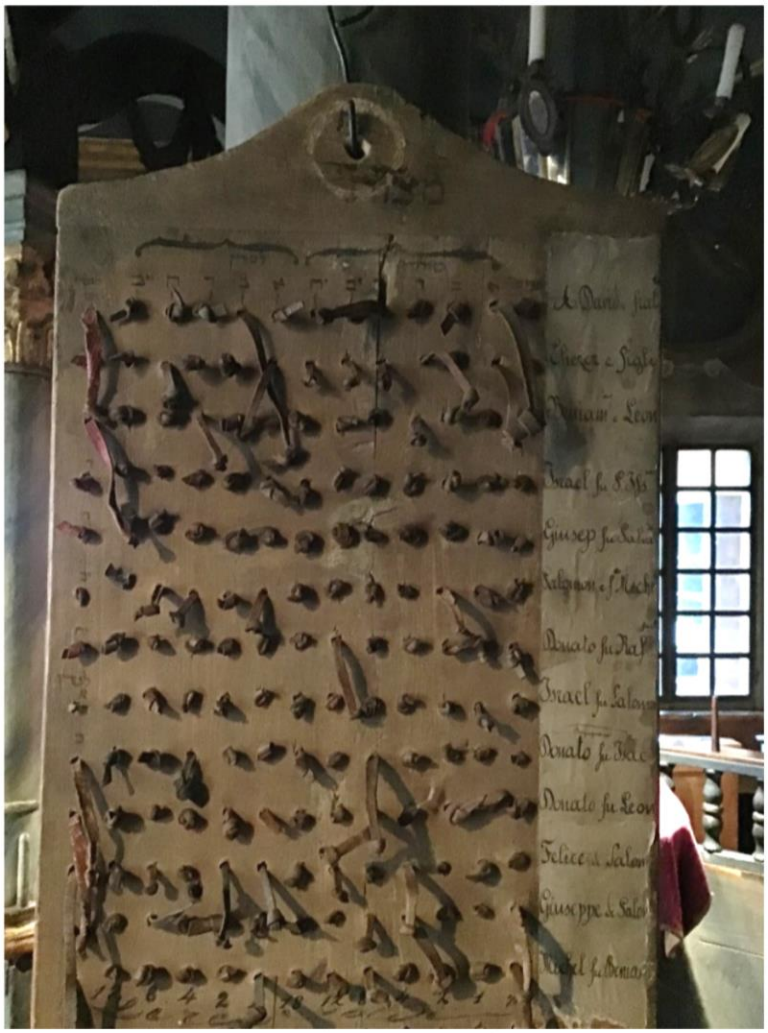
Giving to others does not always come easily to human nature. Fundraisers to this day have to be resourceful in making it as painless as possible. Putting a box where you can't miss it, honoring you with a plaque – these are tried and proven methods.

In Mondovì, I saw two other helpful synagogue tricks:



First, give people **choice**. Let no one say: Sure, I would gladly give, but not to this, only to that. The alms box at Modovì is divided into four compartments: for Torah study and the poor – two small compartments; for maintenance of the synagogue and general charity (which, according to the guide Marco Cerrina Cordero di Montezemolo, included non-Jewish poor) – two bigger compartments. Take your pick, no excuses.

Nor let anyone off the hook with: Sure, I would gladly give, but **not now**. The best attendance at synagogue, and the best setting for generosity, is on the Sabbath: people's minds turn away from the weekday cares of making a living to the blessings the Lord has given them, first and foremost the gift of the Sabbath itself. Their hearts are open, but their pockets must remain closed. On the Sabbath, they are not allowed to touch money, nor to write, i.e. – they cannot even give a written pledge for future payment.



The Lord, in His infinite wisdom, has inspired His people with a brilliant solution: a wooden tablet where, instead of writing the sums pledged, all the *gabbai*, the community's treasurer, has to do is pull a knotted leather cord out of its niche. On the right are the names of the community members (the donors, here already in Italian); on top is a row of Hebrew letters, each with its number value. The row is divided into two parts, on the left – *lire*, on the right – *soldi*. For *soldi* (the smaller denomination), the number goes up to 18, for *lire* – up to twelve. So, even if you had very little money, there was no getting out of it. Theoretically, at least, you could give as little as one *soldo*. In recognition of your generosity, you would be honored with an *aliya*, to say the blessings before and after the reading of the Torah, or in some other form of general approbation.

The synagogue's space

The Prophet Ezekiel, speaking in Babylonian exile after the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE), comforts his listeners with the promise (11:16):

> Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a **little sanctuary** in the countries where they shall come. (KJV)

In a different translation (New International Version), the words מקדש מעט (*mikdash me'at*) are rendered not as "little" sanctuary, but as sanctuary "for a while". Either way, whether interpreted as little or as temporary, the early Sages, in trying to bring a new order in Jewish life after the chaos of the destruction of the Second Temple, understood Ezekiel's little/temporary **sanctuary to mean synagogues.**

This verse from Ezekiel appears in many synagogues, for example in Carmagnola, it encircles the top of the Tevah.

In keeping with its role as a little/temporary replica of the Temple in Jerusalem, the configuration of every synagogue must include three main elements: The *Aron,* the *Tevah,* and the congregation.

The congregation's attention moves between the two focal points: For praying – toward the *aron*, the symbol of God's presence, at a certain distance; for reading God's word, or hearing a sermon – toward the *tevah,* in their midst.

The windows

A synagogue must have windows. Clearly, this is a requirement every sensible architect would endorse, but here too the thinking is not prompted merely by practicality. Perhaps we should say practicality is justified by a non-utilitarian, spiritual argument.

Cherasco's synagogue is bright, with large windows on the east and south walls. The important thing was to have windows on the east wall, around and above the ark. This allowed the congregants to turn their fervent prayers **toward Jerusalem**. The justification for this idea came to the Talmudic Sages from the book of Daniel (6, 10) where, we are told, before being thrown into the lions' den, Daniel prayed at home: "and his windows

being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees… and prayed…"

A more modern interpretation by the 20th century Rabbi Kook sees in large windows a sign that the Jew in prayer is also alert to the **world around** him and to his obligations toward it.

The small **porthole shaped colored-glass window** above the ark seems to me a borrowing from Christian churches. But I am no expert, maybe there is a tradition for this too.

Aron hakodesh, ehàl (the Holy Ark)

The *aron* is where the Torah scrolls are kept (although this was not always the case in the past. The Torah was sometimes kept in a room adjacent to the prayer hall, whether to preserve it from humidity if the main room was unfit, or to prevent the veneration of the physical scrolls themselves). Its placement was always at or on the east wall, turned toward Jerusalem.

The *aron*, the repository of God's word, is the **equivalent of the Ark of the Covenant** that contained the Tablets of the Law given to Moses by God. In the era of the First (Solomon's) Temple, the Ark was kept in the Holy of Holies, a chamber that only the High Priest could enter, and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The entrance to the chamber was screened by a *parokhet*, a partition made of cloth. These tablets were lost in or before the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians; but the Holy of Holies, an empty room, was rebuilt in the Second Temple – a sort of *lieu de memoir* already then.

The Tablets

The *aron* in Cherasco is relatively plain, compared to some others in Piedmont. The chief decoration is the image of the Tablets of the Covenant, showing the familiar **shorthand form of the Decalogue**, on the doors' exterior. The essence of God's **word** or **speech** (because in Hebrew these are not called the Ten Commandments, but the Ten words, hence **Decalogue**)[2] is all there: the nature of the Godhead (His uniqueness and supremacy), the foundation of moral life, and the observance of the Sabbath (the only "ritual" commandment there). The rounded shape of the Tablets is drawn from Christian iconology, not from the Bible. Michelangelo used a rectangular shape for the tablets tucked under Moses' right arm.

On the doors' interior are simple floral decorations, reminiscent of a Dutch floral still life.

Crowns

Above the *aron* are an assortment of **crowns**. These too are reminiscent of Christian motifs (crowning the Virgin Mary, a strong theme here in Cherasco), but have a long tradition in Jewish imagery – in reference to God the King (King of the Universe, King of the Kings of Kings), His Kingdom to come, the Crown of the Torah. In the mystical literature, the crown *(keter*) is the topmost of the ***Sephirot*** of the Tree of Life, whatever that means, and is "so sublime, it is called in the *Zohar* 'the most hidden of all hidden things', and is completely incomprehensible to man." And, I would add, to woman, certainly to this one, who draws her knowledge in this matter from Wikipedia.

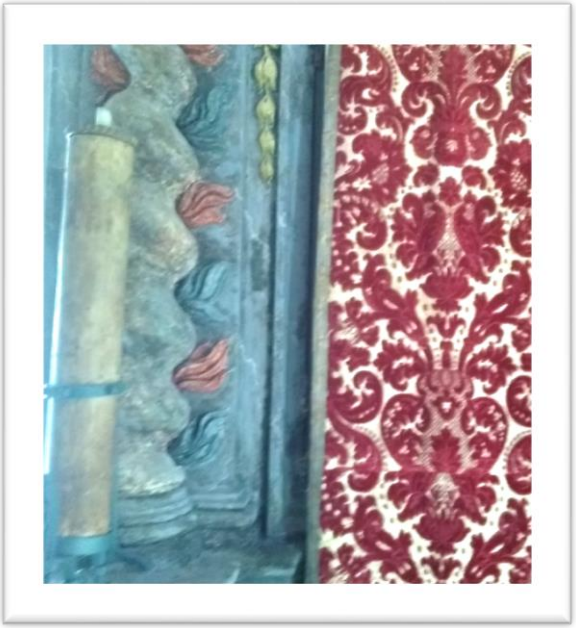
There exists also in Jewish tradition the motif of "**tying crowns**" to the letters of the Torah, as shown here, above the letter. More on this in the section on the typography of the inscriptions.

Candles

On each side of the *aron* there are painted little flames in orange and green. God's revelation in the Bible is often spoken of in terms of **fire**, whether at

[2] Similarly, the word Torah does not mean "law", but "teaching".

the altars of Abraham or Elijah, or the burning bush that appeared to Moses, or in the visions of Ezekiel.



On either side of the *aron* there are two out-sized pillar-like candle holders. A Jew would know what this means: For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light (Proverbs 6, 23), or maybe: The spirit of man is the candle of the LORD (Proverbs 20, 27).

Jewish iconography?

The twisted columns on each side are usually taken to represent the two copper columns that stood at the **entrance of Solomon's Temple** and were given the names: Yachin and Boaz. Here in Cherasco, these are not named, and there is no specific Jewish imagery, such as a menorah, or a shofar, etc. only vegetal and floral motifs. Perhaps decoration that included Jewish motifs was damaged and lost over time, perhaps it never existed. And that's OK: the Temple of Solomon, we are told in 1 Kings 6:29, abounded with **vegetal motifs**, so much so that some believed that the Temple was intended to replicate the **Garden of Eden**. Surely, an eloquent alternative to Jewish visual symbols on the walls are the multiple inscriptions in beautiful Hebrew letters.

Know before Whom you Stand

The *aron* of Cherasco bears a saying that is most commonly inscribed on synagogue arks: "Know before Whom you stand".

This is an adaptation of a sentence in the Talmud regarding prayers, where it appears in the plural form. The singular form harks back to a famous saying in the Mishnah's Tractate Avot ("Sayings of the Fathers"), by a first or second century sage, Rabbi Akavia son of Mahallal'el, who said:

> Know from where you came, to where you go; and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning. 'From where you came' – from a fetid drop; 'to where you go' – to a place of worms and maggots; 'and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning' – before the King of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be He!

This admonishment to keep in mind "before Whom" one is standing can be seen as a reminder for decorous conduct in the synagogue. More to the point, it is an aid to focusing one's attention on His Presence (in synagogue and everywhere), and our humble position in His regards.

Emotionally, however, the sentence is much more powerful than either of the above suggestions: it is an adumbration of **our final hour**. For these words of Rabbi Akavia son of Mahallal'el – Know before Whom! – are recited at every Jewish funeral, when the body is being carried toward the grave. Terrifying words? Hopeful words? Birth, death, and judgment on our life's values and deeds between the points of entry and exit.

Open gates

The other phrase decorating the top of *aron* is taken from the Prophet Isaiah, 26, 2: Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in. (KJV)

This is a joyous chapter in Isaiah, full of consolation and promise, and community members, at least some, would have heard the rest of its uplifting verses ringing in their ears.

There is, of course, something poignant about this promise to the much-afflicted nation that "keeps the truth". This verse, in the context of exile existence in a Christian world, surely had a **defiant ring**. Especially as in this chapter of Isaiah (who lived in the 8th century BCE), as in so many other of his chapters, Christians have found allusions to Jesus.

The image of the **opening of gates** appears frequently in the Bible and other writings, especially mystical ones, and symbolizes an entry into the knowledge of God, into His grace.

The *parokhet* – the screen

The restorers of the Cherasco synagogue were fortunate to find this 18th century piece of fabric, and succeeded in repairing and cleaning it. However, they have chosen to fix it to a rigid backing, so that it cannot be pushed aside, and the *aron* cannot be opened. This is a museological decision, favoring the preservation of the material object over its living functionality.

The Cherasco *parokhet* lacks some of the unique and endearing features that one often sees in synagogues. A finely embroidered *parokhet* could be an outlet for women's participation in the ritual, a labor of love and piety, an opportunity to create a beautiful piece of handwork. More often, probably, it was the work of professionals, i.e., the same artists who fabricated church vestments were also commissioned for a *parokhet*. It took good eyes and hands, good daylight, time and patience, training, high quality materials – not what one would expect from a tired ghetto housewife to do in her evenings.

In Carmagnola, I saw a *parokhet* I found particularly moving, because of its gross error. The poor artisan got the letters mixed up. No one was present to do quality control. When it was finished, the Jews probably gathered around, puzzled and embarrassed. Lots of lovely roses in 3D, beautiful evenly stitched golden threads, nicely aligned letters, but ahimé! Out came mumbo jumbo!

The verse from Psalm 62:8 reads: Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. Selah.

בִּטְחוּ בוֹ בְכָל עֵת עָם שִׁפְכוּ לְפָנָיו לִבַּבְכֶם אֱלֹהִים מַחֲסֶה לָנוּ סֶלָה.

The artisan had taken the word בּוֹ (in him) and stuck it into the middle of בְּטָחוּ (trust). Now it reads more or less like this: when He comes to slaughter ye at all times, ye people.

Oy, what a howler!

I bring this example as a consolation for the absence of personal embellishment on the *parokhet* of Cherasco: perhaps they simply took no chances, and did not entrust this to an ignoramus. Probably saved some money too.

Ner tamid – eternal light

Just as we humans cannot live without light, so also the symbolism of light has always been deeply necessary to us. One of the oldest symbols is the sanctuary lamp, as commanded in the Bible:

> And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamp to burn always. In the tabernacle of the congregation without the veil, which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall order it from evening to morning before the LORD: it shall be a statute for ever unto their generations on the behalf of the children of Israel. (Exodus 27, 20-21, KJV)

In the days of the Temple, a seven-branched lampstand (*menorah*) burned day and night in front of the Holy Ark. The second (i.e. middle) candle on the left of the lamp was kept burning throughout the day, while the others were extinguished at sunrise; from its flame the other candles were lit in the evening, as the last act of ritual performed in the Temple before closing for the night. This middle candle on the left then is the "continuous flame", the *ner tamid*, and by extension – this is the name given to the lamp suspended over the *aron* in synagogues. The permanence of this never-extinguished candle was testimony to the permanence of God's presence. But a

perpetual flame naturally also recalls Moses' first encounter with God, in the vision of the burning bush, which burned but was not consumed. The miracle at Sinai was the **continued** burning, and this was a powerful metaphor for the Jewish people – the Jews endure, and the fire of Sinai is still burning.

In post-Temple Jewish cult, every synagogue has a lamp hanging in front of the *aron*, and its flame is never allowed to dim or go out. Today, in the age of convenience, this light is an electric bulb. In the days of the Cherasco ghetto, it required the **presence of active Jews**, who would see to the continuous supply of olive oil. Thus, in those days, the eternal light signified, literally and not metaphorically, not only God's faithful presence, but also the faithful presence of His people.

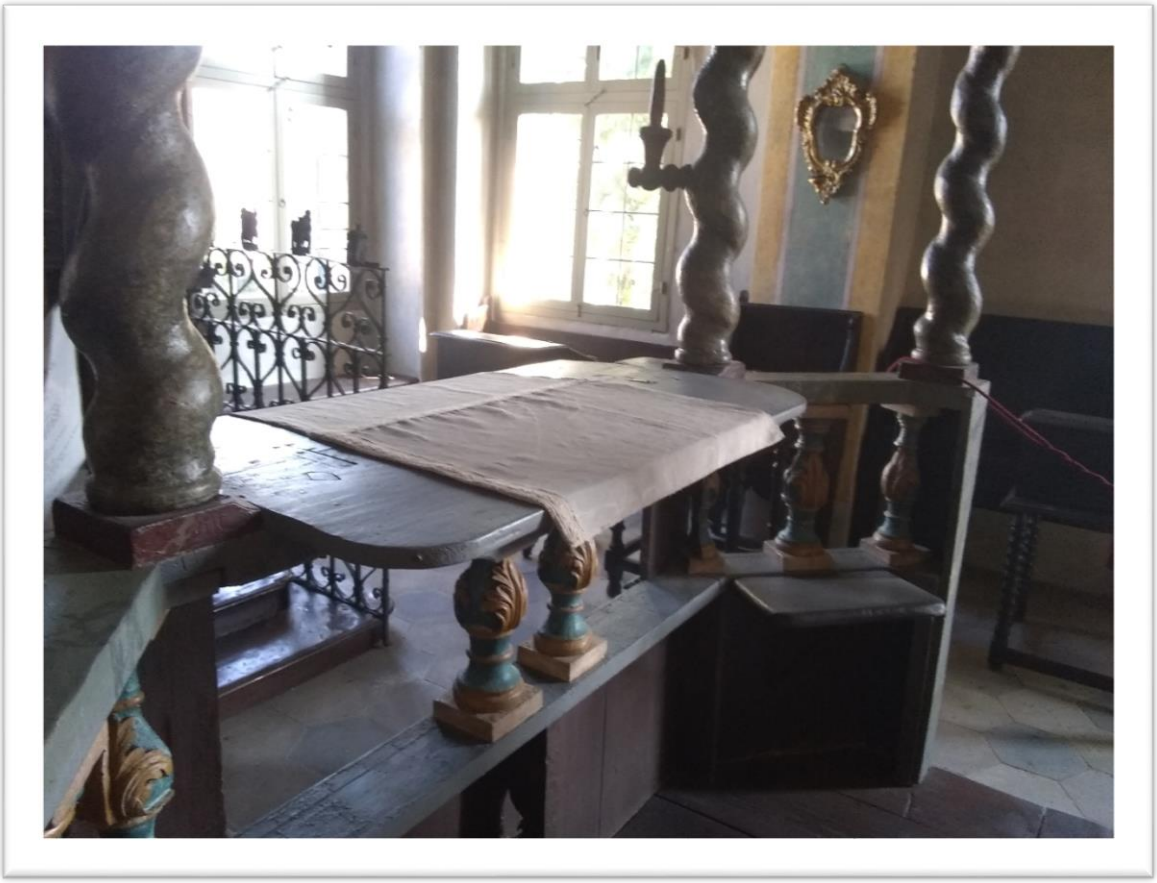
Christian tradition has adopted the concept of eternal light over the tabernacle as a symbol of the presence of Christ.

The *Tevah* (or *Duchan*)

Function of the Tevah

The *tevah*, where the scrolls are rolled out for reading aloud to the congregation, is the **equivalent of the Temple altar**, where animal sacrifices used to be offered, in front of the *parokhet* screening the Holy of Holies. Once the Second Temple was destroyed, prayers became instituted as the substitute for animal offerings, a spiritual equivalent acceptable to God.

Thus in most old Italian synagogues (and not only), the *tevah* was set in front of the *aron*, **replicating the altar's placement** in front of the Holy of Holies.



The central position in the hall enabled its encirclement during the **singing and dancing** at *Simchat Torah* (celebrating the termination of the annual cycle of reading the Torah). This was a reminder of the service in the Jerusalem Temple during the feast of Sukkot. The **shofar was sounded** on *Rosh Hashana*, the beginning of the new year, from the *tevah*, just as the trumpets had been sounded near the altar in the Temple.

Another good reason, or effect, of the central placement of the *tevah* was that it created space, be it ever so small, as in Cherasco, for a little festive march-parade with the Torah scrolls, wrapped in fine fabrics and tinkling with their silver ornaments, from the *aron* to the lectern of the *tevah*. This too was a reminder of something, of an event prior even to the Temple, prior to the entry into the Promised Land, namely, of the **sojourn of the Ark of the Covenant in the desert.**

Besides these ritual reasons for the placement and function of the *tevah*, there was also a **practical consideration**: Placed in the center of the synagogue, it is at the heart of the congregation, enabling everyone to see, hear, and participate.

Unlike the lectern of a preacher or reader in a church, which is designed for one person, the Tevah is spacious. It must accommodate a number of people: the reader himself, the person(s) who have received the honor of an *aliyah* – saying the blessings before and after the reading of each section, such as a *bar-mitzvah* boy – and others who have functions associated with the ritual.

Shape of the *Tevah*

There are no specific stipulations what the *tevah* should look like. Perhaps the only indication is that it should be **slightly raised** from floor level, as the altar in the Temple was also raised. Reading from the Torah is referred to in Hebrew as "coming up" (*Aliyah*), spiritually, of course, but also literally. There are other parallels with the Temple altar.

Curiously, in the late Baroque synagogues, such as this one, it was customary to make the *tevah* an edifice within the edifice, an ornate construct, with twisting columns, a crown-shaped top, lavish vegetal decorations, similar to the baldachins so common in Italian churches. This one is at Cherasco's Madonna del Popolo.

This is what the non-Jewish artisans knew how to make, and what the Jews of Cherasco (and elsewhere in Italy) apparently liked. Bruno Taricco writes that there may have been Jewish wood workers who could have crafted the synagogue's furnishings. However, I see nothing Jewish in the decorations. Where did big white shells come from?

The result – rather down-home, clearly not as elegant as in some of the bigger, richer communities. Still, the effect is touching for being a bit folksy.

If these congregants had any doubts about the appropriateness of such an elaborate construct, which may well have reminded them of a canopy for bearing the effigy of the Virgin Mary or the local patron saint, they could always justify their choice with Scriptural backing. The existence of a **"tower"** (*migdal*) from which the Torah is read appears in the Bible. The Book of Nehemia (Chap. 8, 4-5) describes the occasion when, upon the return of the Judeans from the 70 years of Babylonian exile, Ezra the Scribe (or "Teacher of the Law") gathers the people in a Jerusalem square and reads to them the "Book of the Law of Moses… Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a **high wooden platform** built for the occasion."

The congregation

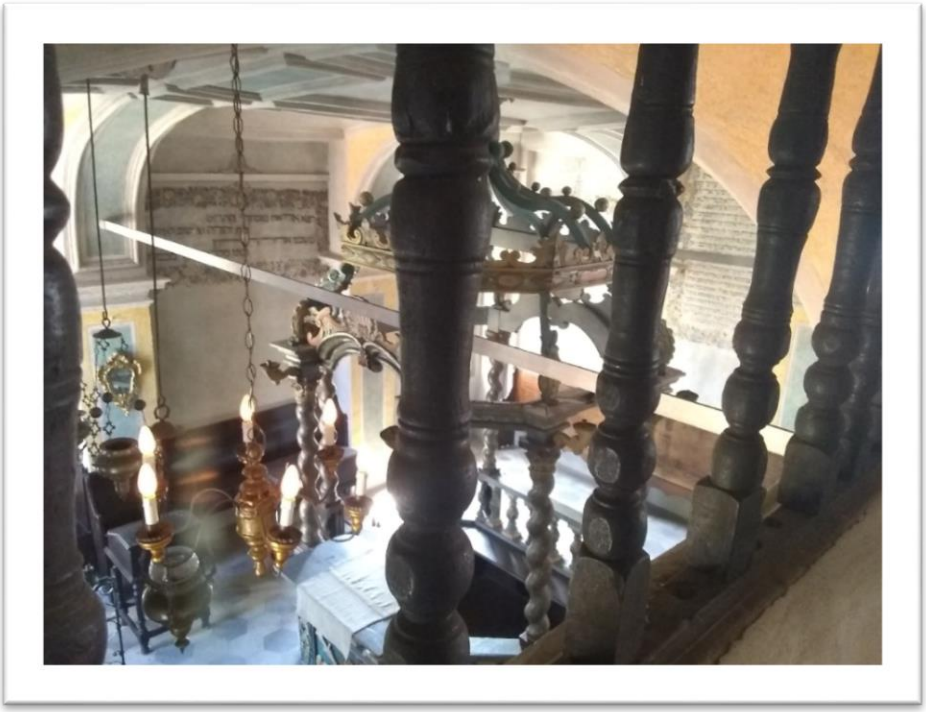
The placement of the *tevah* in the center and the benches along the walls has a long history, as far back as the Second Temple period itself.

This configuration not only allows every member to see and hear the readings and prayers, to participate in the full sense of "public prayer", but also to see his fellow congregants on the opposite side.

The seating is quite egalitarian (although one could always squabble about preferred seats, closer to the *aron*). The face one sees in front of one's eyes is

always that of another, of one's neighbor. God's face, if He had one, can only be reflected in other human faces, all of whom are made in His image.

Some of the benches along the walls are believed to be from the 17th century, possibly transferred from the earlier, pre-ghetto, synagogue, or from some other source.



Women

The separation of women from the main prayer area is a late development in Judaism, not one prescribed in the Bible.

The name used for the women's section, or women's court, borrows a Temple term: *ezrat nashim*, but the similarity is in name only. At the time of the Temples (first and second), women were not usually separated from men, and the *ezrat nashim* was used by both sexes (except during the wild dancing associated with the water libation described in the opening section).

The separation in synagogues could be done either by screening off a portion of the main prayer room, or raising a gallery above it (or, in medieval times, sometimes a basement below!). Given the preferred seating arrangement along the walls in the main hall, and given the smallness of the space, an upper gallery was the more practical solution, even if the ceiling had to be raised, as here, in order to accommodate it.

In most old synagogues, the upper floor gallery was small, dark, and undecorated. A wood grating allowed the matrons to observe the hall below. Here, in Cherasco, we see that an additional piece of balustrade was painted in *trompe l'oeil* on the wall; someone must have decided that the ensemble looked better that way. The look, the harmony, obviously, mattered.

Women were not under the same obligation to attend public prayers as the men, they were not given formal religious schooling, and most of them probably did not understand Hebrew. What they could see from above was, mainly, the spectacle of the Torah scrolls being taken out of the *aron*, the reading and singing from the *tevah*, and whether their boys were behaving themselves down there.

What's missing?

In *The Garden of the Finzi Contini*, the protagonist's father, speaking to his son about the Finzi-Contini family, remembers that:

> *… They had always preferred to spend their real money for aristocratic trivialities; like when, in '33, to find an ehàl and a parochèt worthy of their personal synagogue (genuine Sephardic articles, for heaven's sakes, they mustn't be Portuguese, or Catalan, or Provençal, but Spanish, and of proper dimensions!), they had journeyed by car, with a Carnera following them, all the way to Cherasco, in the province of Cuneo, a village that until 1910, or around then, had been the headquarters of a little Jewish community, now extinct, and where only the cemetery had remained in operation, simply because some families in Turin, which had originally lived in the place, Debenedetti, Momigliano, Terracini, et cetera, continued to bury their dead there…*
>
> Giorgio Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*, translated by William Weaver, HBJ, New York and London, 1977, pp 46-47.

I cannot help wondering: What precious ritual articles had the small community of Cherasco possessed in the distant past, objects that were still *in situ* in 1933, which made it worthwhile for the elitist *Sepharadim* of Ferrara to travel all the way to Piedmont to buy them?

Judging by what we see today, by the rustic *aron* (*ehàl*) and the 18th century fabric *parokhet* – they could not have had much to offer the refined Finzi-Contini.

An author is, of course, permitted poetic license. But the sense of insult felt by the non-Sephardic father of Bassani's protagonist sounds authentic. And the reference to *Sephardi* elitism, even arrogance, may well have applied also to the Jews of Cherasco.

The Verses on the Walls

When? Who? What? Why?

If the previous features are common to all or most traditional, especially Italian, synagogues, one element is clearly distinct: the unique choice of inscriptions, which the congregants selected to decorate the walls and the furnishings. Here, considerable freedom and imagination were permitted. It is here we must look for whatever is particular, peculiar, that is – personal, about the Cherasco community.

It is, however, a language that is no longer familiar to most Jews, not even necessarily to Orthodox Jews who know the tradition, and certainly not to secular Israelis, who know only modern Hebrew, and whose ears are generally deaf to the echoes of tradition.

As we see in wall decorations of Italian churches, castles and palazzi, there is usually a guiding mind that devises the decoration program. It could be the commissioner of the work – prince or prelate, or a spiritual or intellectual advisor, such as a theologian or a humanist, someone in a position of authority and/or knowledge who spells out what the walls will communicate.

We do not know who this person was in Cherasco[3], and whether all the inscriptions date from the same period and are from the same hand. B. Taricco mentions two names of literate people, who might have functioned as, or also, as *rabbino* and instructor: Claudio Colombo (Jona in Hebrew) from Fossano (active c. 1734) and Gabriele Levi ("Polacco") around the early to mid-19th century. Perhaps it was some inspired soul from a neighboring community who served as muse.

In the Hebrew liturgy, a modest, but not *too* modest, poet often worked out an acrostic (using the first letter in each line of verse) that spelled out his name. I did not see one here. What we see is the occasional appearance of three dots,

[3] Rabbi Somekh in his interpretation of stanza 3 (see below), conjectured that it contained an allusion to Raffael Shelomo Baruch as its presumed author. I did not find in Taricco's book a De Benedetti that fit this conjecture.
In stanza 2, Rabbi Somekh saw a possible allusion to its author - Rafaelle Yehuda. If these are indeed allusions to the author(s), maybe they were from one of the other families?

hovering like a pyramid above certain words. This is like a lighthouse signal flashing in the night – See here, see here, this is a name of someone we all know and honor!

We know that the community began to dwindle almost immediately after Emancipation (1848) and the death of that Gabriele Levi, the last "rabbi" (1857). Thus, it is perhaps logical to assume that the decorative inscriptions are indeed from the 18th century, from the period of the community's maximum cohesiveness and strength (c. 90 people), i.e. – from the era of Donato and Abramo. All the names to which they hint could have belonged to members, alive or dead, of the participating families.

What did they know? What did they think?

In looking at the inscriptions in the Cherasco synagogue, one question occupied me most of all:

How much Jewish learning did the members of this tiny community have? Jewish life has always required Jewish scholarship – Hebrew, Aramaic, Bible, Talmud, liturgy, and the vast post-Talmudic rabbinic and mystical

literature. To produce scholars, a community needs a certain size, and sufficient wealth, to train and support them, or, at least, to attract and afford scholars from the outside. Living Jewishly was always an expensive proposition.

The assumption has to be that given their minuscule number, the Cherasco community members did not, could not, know much. In this case, I may be investing the messages they have left us with much more meaning than they intended. On the other hand, the inscriptions are before us, the choice of words is theirs, and we must credit them with possession of a certain abundance from which to have chosen these and not others.

The floral frames

Floral wreaths, a few light colors, a ribbon to tie them together, basic. Is it a little *kitschy*? *Kitsch* in the sense of being insincere, of conveying a message of an exaggerated, even a girlish, sort of cheerful innocence? Maybe.

All the more reason to focus on the writings themselves. What do these walls say? What do they imply?

Form

The verses are grouped in short quatrains, and are rhymed (more or less, usually rather weakly) in a scheme of a-b-a-b. Seven have been well preserved, two were found in a state that did not permit reconstruction of their sense.

Source

These verses are selected from a number of the many venerated texts in the treasure house of Jewish literature. Here – from the Bible, the Talmud, poetry, and liturgy. Here and there, the writer has ventured his own invention.

Technique and Function

Since Hebrew was not a spoken language in the diaspora, creative writing too became rather stiff, downright arthritic at times, or, on the contrary – painfully acrobatic, contortionist. Most writers composed their texts out of a fixed reservoir of words and expressions lifted out of earlier works, and homogenized them into a more or less smooth – hopefully comprehensible – flow. A writer would shine by showing his learned command of the sources, not by inventing new forms.

For poetry, where language is everything, this imitative technique was deadly. It took true geniuses in the last 300 years to transform the old

language into the supple and rich medium of expression, which is modern Hebrew.

I do not claim the status of poetry for the verses on these walls, but there is more here than simple, mechanical quotations and manipulations. As indicated earlier, the form of rhymed quatrains does not come from the Hebrew tradition of poetry – there seems to me something quite Italian about these verses, indicating that their composer was familiar with Italian poetry, and aspired to imitate it.

The result is not Dante or Petrarca, but a rather special form of Jewish expression. The trick, as I said, was to take snippets of verses or sayings – no need to give the full quote, since the public was well versed with the context – and to weave them in a pleasing form. The verses may be "massaged" by the local poet – keeping them still recognizable and familiar, but changing syntax, words, or word order to fit the desired format. For example, to elicit a rhyme, or to produce an acrostic with the poet's name, or to divulge the year of composition.

Another function of such verses was to devise a discrete way to accommodate for normal human vanity. As a synagogue, unlike a church, has no family chapels and no tombstones, and as the donors cannot display proud family crests (as on the walls of Cherasco's Monte di Pietà), let alone portraits, the way to honor the congregation's supporters is to allude to the donors' names in the verses chosen. Such names may be highlighted either by more prominent lettering, or by three dots above a name (Solomon, Judah, Raphael, Gabriel, Israel, possibly Joshua), or above a word which is a verb but also serves as a name (Baruch – to bless or be blessed, or Meir – to spread light).

The result is one of intimacy and playfulness, since congregation members, at least some of them, could be counted on being able to figure out the at times arcane allusions, and certainly all could recognize their neighbors' names embedded in the texts.

Because each line is often only a snippet from a mother text, it always refers to, or echoes, that larger text. It is a type of shorthand, replete with shared meanings and memories that need not be spelled out to the home crowd.

Example

The fourth line of the quatrain we have numbered 6 (photo above) quotes the last verse in the one and only chapter that constitutes the book of the prophet Obadiah: And saviours shall come up on mount Zion. (KJV).

"Saviours shall come up on mount Zion" is a prophetic consolation, but there are many similar consolations elsewhere in the Bible. Why would they choose this verse and not another? You could say: they **were familiar** with it[4]. Sure, but there are many other familiar chapters and verses that would do the job.

The key, it seems to me, is in Obadiah's **preceding verse**: And the captivity of this host of the children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites, even unto Zarephath; and the captivity of Jerusalem, which is in Sepharad, shall possess the cities of the south.

Zarephat was the Hebrew name later given to **France**, and Sepharad, which is **mentioned nowhere else** in the Bible, is the name later given to **Spain**. What could be more natural than for a Jewish community originating from France and Spain to allude to their history? Not directly, of course, no need, *ha-mevin yavin*, he who understands, will understand. The subliminal message being: this is about *us*.

[4] Familiar, since it is **read aloud every year**, as the *haftarah* (a reading from the books of the Prophets that complements a portion of the Torah reading) for the Torah portion known as *Vayishlach*, Genesis 32. In other words, this *haftarah* from Obadiah, is read immediately after the story of Jacob's meeting with his brother Esau upon the former's return to the land of Canaan.

Meaning

Although the format is light and playful, the message is serious. The verses evoke, directly and, mostly, indirectly, some of the great moments of Jewish experience – the Covenant with Abraham (3), the Temple of Solomon (3), King David (5), the prophet Elijah (2), the parting of the Red Sea (2, 4). There are reminiscences of the Temple in its glory (2), of our dwelling in the Land of Promise (2). There are admonitions for good conduct (1, 6), words of love and joy (2, 3, 5), and allusions to the messianic redemption (4, 6).

As this is the only written message these ancestors have left on the walls, we must consider it with attention, always remembering: They could have written something else, they chose to write this.

What they have left us on the walls illustrates both the content and the method of Jewish living. The inscriptions speak of memories, longings, and hopes – past, present and future, all rolled in one overarching sense of being. They do this by using the age-old Jewish method of endowing every word of Scripture, and every act of the present, with meanings that blur the boundaries of past and present. The very use of Hebrew already presupposes an echo chamber of meanings and feelings.

If we have any sympathy for our ancestors, we need to make an effort to catch these echoes. Or maybe it's the other way around: if we could but catch what they are trying to say, we would have for them much sympathy. They, at any rate, have made an effort to communicate to us what they considered to be the meaning of their life.

The inscriptions in detail

1.

O Figlio d'uomo miserevole
Fai attenzione a c'io' che (Ti sia dinanzi) 1
E quandi preghi non ti montar la testa
Confessa piuttosto il tuo peccato. 2

1 Prov. 23, 1, Lev. 26, 40

בן אדם הַנִּכאֶה
בין תבין את אשר [לפניך]
ובהתפללך אל תתגאה
והתודה על עוונך

Line 1 – O Figlio d'uomo miserevole

The first line uses a rare word, which Rabbi Somekh has translated as "miserevole". It is taken from a poem by Shlomo Ibn Gabirol or Gavirol

(11th century Spain), which appears in the Italian Prayer Book for the morning of Yom Kippur, titled: שֹׁכְנֵי בָתֵּי-חֹמֶר – Those who dwell in houses of clay.[5]

הָאָדָם הַנִּכְאֶה, / פְּקַח עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה
מֵאַיִן בּוֹאֶךָ / וְאָנָה מוֹצָאֶךָ.

The congregation probably did not need more than this short reference to know the rest of IG's line: O miserable man/open your eyes and see. A clear admonition to open one's eyes, **to know one's place in God's world**. And perhaps not only in the religious sense intended by IG, but, as the next line in the Cherasco inscription indicates, also in the matters of this world.

A visual and auditory connection between the first two lines may perhaps be seen in the slight change the Cherasco poet has made from Ibn Gavirol's text. Whereas IG wrote, simply: Man (*adam*), the inscription here reads: Son of Man (*ben adam*). This little addition of "ben" may have been necessary for the fullness of the verse, but it also alliterates the following

[5] In 2007, this poem, with a dozen others by Ibn Gavirol, was set to music by two Israeli **rock** singers Berry Sakharof and Rea Mochiach. Ibn Gavi(**rock**n)rol, one reviewer called it. For a change, this was not the customary sentimental jazzing-up of religious texts and melodies for easy popular appeal, but something new. I have no ear for rock music, but must admire a serious effort by artists to inherit the treasures of the past and to render them relevant to the modern, in this case - Israeli secular, experience. Berry Sakharof told a reviewer he was responding to Ibn Gavirol's "blues". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exoHNWGjq-A.

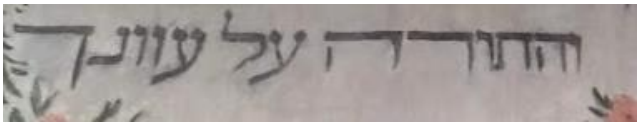
line which begins with the word *bin* (understand). Our Cherasco poet obviously did not feel he had to respect to the letter IG's terse, austere poetry. He could "improve" on it.

Line 2 - Fai attenzione a c'io' che (Ti sia dinanzi)

This line is the second part of a verse in the Book of Proverbs (23:1), which begins with: When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you.

It is unlikely that Cherasco Jews had many opportunities to "dine with a ruler". The word that is traditionally understood to mean "to dine", or "to eat bread", can also be understood as "to fight", "to make war against" the tyranny of the ruler. Either way, the verse cautions us to use **wisdom in dealing with the world** around us.

The word for "what is before you", i.e. the crucial rhyming word, is missing. Why? I suspect the inexperienced painter had a problem of **spacing**. The number of characters in line 2 and in line 4 is identical – 14 in each, so it was not a problem of varying lengths of text. Yet in line 2 an entire word had to be left out, whereas in line 4 three letters are st-r-e-tched out unnaturally. Looks like the calligrapher couldn't get it quite right. Apparently, he felt he could rely on the congregation to mentally fill in the missing word themselves.



Line 3 - E quandi preghi non ti montar la testa

This expression is not found in the Jewish sources, but it echoes the words of various prophets, who were always critical of **pretense and hypocrisy** in the service of God.

It is interesting that the community leaders chose this admonition, out of many other possible, maybe more serious ones, to educate their little public. This line ties in with the one in Stanza 7 – about the desirable conduct in the synagogue, and outside it too. The demand for **modesty and sincerity** in prayer leads logically to the next line:

Line 4 - Confessa piuttosto il tuo peccato.

There are countless references in the Jewish sources to repentance, to returning from sin to worthy conduct. Here, the verse is taken from Leviticus 26:40, where it appears in the plural form, whereas in Cherasco it's been turned into the singular, whether for more direct personal impact, or for the sake of the rhyme.

It may also be a way of tying back to Ibn Gavirol's poem, which, close to its ending says: How many are our sins/how shall we show our face? (free translation).

In summary: the stanza speaks of humility and repentance, simultaneously with mental alertness, open eyes, understanding. These are two movements of the soul: vis-à-vis the world – knowledge, comprehension, a position of mental independence and strength; vis-à-vis the creator of the universe – a posture of submission.

2.

Ripara, mio Dio, il Tuo altare distrutto 1
Allora la casa di Giuda tornara' nella sua sede 2
Trascinami, corriamo dietro a Te 3
Ripristina il TuoSantuario al Suo posto 4
(nel testo appaiono i nomi del presunto autore: Rafael Yehuda)
1 Re 18, 30; 2 Esodo 14, 27; 3 Cant 1,4; 4 Esodo 15, 17

רפא אלי את מזבחך ההרוס
בית יהודה אז ישוב לאיתנו
משכני אחריך נרוץ
וכונן מקדשך על מכונו.

Line 1 - Ripara, mio Dio, il Tuo altare distrutto

The first line echoes Elijah's confrontation with the 400 priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel, where God, in the form of fire from heaven, consumed Elijah's offering ("holocaustum") at the altar. This event concludes with the people's awed response, twice in a row: 'The Lord is God, the Lord is God.' Elijah, who was later swept up to heaven in a chariot of fire, became in Jewish tradition the harbinger of the final redemption.

The word for *ripara* (heal) in Hebrew is *refa*, hence a possible allusion to Refael-Raphael – the angel, or to the father of the two brothers Donato and Abramo, or to some other community member of this name, or one who may or may not have composed the stanza. The Bible narration notes briefly, factually, that it was Elijah who rebuilds the altar of God, which the Baal worshippers had destroyed. Here, however, the context is one of prayer, and is rendered: Heal, *my* God – in the singular, mine personally – has the intimacy of a verse from the Psalms. In the liturgy, the by far more common form of address to God is in plural – *our* God.

Line 2 - Allora la casa di Giuda tornara' nella sua sede

The 'House of Judah' will return to its former strength – this echoes the verse in Exodus 14 that describes the great miracle at the Red Sea (or rather: Sea of Reeds) after the drowning of the Egyptian army: the sea returned at dawn to its "former strength." As an Israeli, I cannot help noting that the verse does not say Judah will return to his homeland. Maybe this was obvious, or maybe, on the contrary, it was entirely beyond the horizon of expectation, and was left as vague as can be.

Line 3 - Trascinami, corriamo dietro a Te

This is a quote from the Song of Songs, with a slight change, for the sake of the rhyme. The biblical verse begins with "Draw me", and continues with "we will be glad and rejoice in thee." These may have been love or wedding songs in ancient Israel, but the Sages, in debating whether they belong in the collection of Sacred Scriptures, decided to interpret them allegorically. It was to be all about the love between God and Israel, not about a man and a woman. Christians did the same thing: it was all about the love of Christ and his Church. This poetry was just too beautiful to leave out, but a bit too risqué to leave in without some allegorical trappings.

Line 4 - Ripristina il Tuo Santuario al Suo posto

This line, again in petition form, harks back to one of the great moments of the book of Exodus, the Song of the Sea, sung by Moses and all the people, after the miracle of the Red Sea, which split open to let the Israelites pass through, and then covered the pursuing Egyptians. This poem is in a Hebrew that was already archaic at the time when its surrounding text was written. Its antiquity, the uniqueness of some of its forms, add to its sublimity.

Summary: The fourth line parallels the first one – the rebuilding of the Sanctuary; the second line speaks of Judah's return ; while the third line – a bit of an oddity here perhaps – is about the joy, the youthfulness (let us run together) of love.

All of these are evocations of great moments when God intervened in the life of His people, when His love for them was as palpable as that between a youth and a maiden. But the form of address is petitionary – this is what once was, not what we have now, it is what we pray and hope for.

3.

Così come Raffaele e' stato inviato al tuo servo
E come la Costruzione di Salomone il Nostro Padre ha benedetto
Così saziaci al mattino della Tua misericordia
E saremo lieti e felici per tutta la vita. 1

1 Sal. 90, 14

הן כרפאל שולח אל עבדך
וכבנין שלמה ברך אבינו
כן שבענו בבקר חסדך
ונרננה ונשמחה בכל ימינו.

Line 1 - Così come Raffaele e' stato inviato al tuo servo

As [the angel] Raphael was sent to your servant [Abraham]. The angels appear by name in later writings, and in the Kabbalah, not in the Bible. In this imaginative, folkloristic vein, Raphael, the medical angel, is seen to have been sent by God to heal Abraham after the latter's circumcision. So, again, as in 2 above, we have the motif of healing.

Line 2 - E come la Costruzione di Salomone il Nostro Padre ha benedetto

As the building of Solomon was blessed by our Father…

The evocation of the Temple always refers to the First Temple, to those mythic, glorious days, when the son of David, the wisest of men, the friend of God, reigned over a happy, united, powerful kingdom, whom no one

could challenge and many came to admire (e.g. Queen of Sheba). God personally specified how His Temple should be built, as divine architect, interior designer and choreographer. The Tablets of the Covenant, the very ones given to Moses at Sinai, were kept there, in the very Ark in which had been carried in the desert and subsequently peregrinated in the land of Canaan for hundreds of years.

Lines 3-4 Così saziaci al mattino della Tua misericordia
E saremo lieti e felici per tutta la vita.

– so, "satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." These two lines are a direct quotation from Psalm 90:14. Our life-long joy stems from God's mercy, the same mercy and blessing, which he bestowed upon Solomon and upon Abraham, both exemplary partners to the Covenant.

Summary: This inscription invokes two examples of past divine mercies (the first, in line 1, entirely unscriptural) for the fulfillment of the congregation's, or the people's, hope for God's grace, which alone is the source of life-long rejoicing. The Bible has a large vocabulary for words of joy, here two synonyms are used.

4

Dio d'Israele che dai forza e coraggio 1
Innalza e stendi una capanna di pace sui Tuoi figli
Tu che dai luce al mondo dall'empireo agli abissi
Benedeci e Salva il Tuo proteto 2
(nel testo appaiono i nomi del presunto autore: Israel Meir)

(anche le parole Barekch Wehoshia sono puntate, possano essere allusione a nomi: Barukh De Benedetti, Giosue', oppure ad una data 5624 – 1864)
1 Sal. 68, 35, 2 Sal 86, 16

אֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל הנותן עֹז וְתַעֲצֻמוֹת
הקם ופרוש סכת שלום על בניך
המאיר מרום עולם עד תהמת
ברך והושיעה לבן ימינך

Line 1 - Dio d'Israele che dai forza e coraggio - God of Israel who gives strength and courage

If ever we wonder whence the Jewish people draws its courage and strength to withstand so many afflictions, the answer, quoted here directly from Psalm 68:35, is resounding: … the God of Israel is he that giveth strength and power [unto his people. Blessed be God.]

Line 2 - Innalza e stendi una capanna di pace sui Tuoi figli – Raise and spread over your sons a sukkah of peace

What do we wish for ourselves from this God of power, the Almighty? We ask him to erect and to extend – two actions are specified here – over his children a *sukkah* (a temporary hut, such as we build at Sukkot, our Festival of Rejoicing). This is a touching metaphor: not a *palazzo*, not a *castello*, just a humble *sukkah*. We ask this not from the omnipotent God of the universe, but from our Father. This modest, intimate request for a cover over our heads appears three times in the daily evening prayer, as the mind turns toward the night's sleep.

Line 3 - Tu che dai luce al mondo dall'empireo agli abissi - He who shines light from the summit of the world down to the abysses

– is reminiscent both of the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:5, 8) mentioned above, but also of certain psalms. It rhymes with, and echoes, the first line in evoking God's power.

Line 4 - Benedeci e Salva il Tuo proteto - Bless and redeem the son of your right [hand].

This turn of phrase, "son of your right," does not exist in the sources, though there are references to the saving strength of God's right hand. Psalm 86:16 says: O turn unto me, and have mercy upon me; give thy strength unto thy servant, and save the **son of thine handmaid.**

I don't know why the Cherasco locals chose this uncommon phrase, maybe there was someone named Benjamin ("son of the right") in the congregation, someone who would have been pleased by this invention. Most likely, it was a reference to the Messiah. See below discussion of the *Brich shme* prayer.

5.

Ama Iddio ma senza sofrire
Come Jonatan amo' il suo amico 1
Venga, si presenti con giubilo alla porta 2
A chiamare Iddo che le esaudira' 3
1 Davide, 2 Sal. 126, 6, 3 Giob. 12, 4

אהוב את יי אך לא בצער
וכמו יהונתן אהב רעהו
בא יבא ברינה פתח ושער
קורא אל אלוה ויענהו.

Line 1 - Ama Iddio ma senza sofrire – Love God without suffering

A strange admonition. Who wants to love God in sorrow? A phrase, which does not appear in this blunt form in the sources, smacks of **polemics**. It could be directed against Christianity, with its all-pervasive image of a suffering God, and the monastic discipline of life-long austerity, or it could be levelled against certain strands of Jewish mystics, who had adopted practices of extreme asceticism.

Line 2 – Come Jonatan amo' il suo amico – As Jonathan loved his companion.

No, God does not require us to live in renunciation and self-denial, but to love Him freely, as Jonathan loved David, an exemplary love between two

men, who transformed what could have been personal rivalry for the crown of Israel into great friendship. In these two lines, we have the word "love" twice.

Line 3 – Venga, si presenti con giubilo alla porta – He will come in joy in the entrance and the gate

The first three words are taken from Psalm 126 about the people's joyous return to Zion, a psalm that is sung at mealtimes on all festival days and Sabbaths. A line, that is, which all the congregants not only knew by heart, but also heard in their inner ear the tune to which it was sung. This line mentions an **entrance and a gate**, hence its obvious **placement above the door**.

Line 4 – A chiamare Iddo che le esaudira' – One…who calls upon God, and He answers him.

This line is a direct quote from the Book of Job 12:4, but, as so often with Job, one of the linguistically most difficult books in the Bible, it is hard to tell what exactly he means in the context. Out of context, as here, it seems clear enough.

In summary: Love of God will bring us joy, an opening of gates, because he is a God who answers those who call upon Him.

6.

Astieniti da parlar profano in ogni tua conversazione
Cantate invece, al Suo nome perché è soave 1
E rispondo Amen con tutta la tua forza. 2
Cosicche' saliranno a Sion i Salvatori. 3

1 Sal. 135, 3, Talmud Chabb.119, b, 3 Ob. 1, 21

מנע מדבר חול בכל שיחך
אך זמרו לשמו כי נעים
וענה אמן בכל כחך
ויעלו לציון מושיעים.

Line 1 – Astieniti da parlar profano in ogni tua conversazio – Avoid speaking of profane matters in all you conversations

This rather pontificating precept is not drawn from the Bible or other sources – these are generally endowed with more common sense. Is it possible in all one's conversation not to talk about everyday matters? Here, on the synagogue wall, perhaps it simply means to avoid talking during the service.

Line 2 – Cantate invece, al Suo nome perché è soave

Instead of chatting or gossiping, rather sing praises unto His name, for it is pleasant – a direct quote from Psalm 135, 3, which recalls the service in the Temple (Ye that stand in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God.)

Line 3 – E rispondo Amen con tutta la tua forza – And respond 'Amen' with all your might.

This is taken from the Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 119 b:

> Resh Lakish said: He who responds 'Amen' with all his might, has the gates of Paradise opened for him, as it is written [see section **Open Gates above**], Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth truth [*shomer emunim*] may enter in: read not *'shomer emunim'* but *'she'omrim amen'* [that say, amen]. What does 'amen' mean? — Said R. Hanina: God, faithful King. [Interpreting it as an abbreviation: **e**l **m**elek **n**e'eman, which gives us the Hebrew letters **AMN**, or Amen].

Surely, there is much playfulness in the Talmud, especially in devising these arbitrary word games in order to make a point. For the Cherasco folks who decided to put this particular precept on the wall, I think it simply corresponds to Line 1 – something about the proper conduct during the service, maybe just making sure no one has fallen asleep. A big AMEN now, everybody!

Line 4 – Cosicche' saliranno a Sion i Salvatori – And saviours shall come up on mount Zion

This is a nearly direct quote from the last verse of the single chapter that makes up the Book of Obadiah. The only change from the prophet's text is

an inversion of the subject's place in the sentence, for the benefit of the rhyme.

This verse has intrigued me more than any other, as explained in the introductory section about the inscriptions, where I pondered why, of all the consolation prophecies available in the Bible, the Cheraschesi chose this one.

There are other points to note:

The chapter is a prophecy about the ancient kingdom of Edom, the inheritance of Esau, Jacob's brother (now presumably the area of Petra in Jordan). In later Jewish tradition, Edom was the name ascribed to the Roman Empire, and by extension later – to Christianity, its heir. Italian Jews would surely have read it in this light – the downfall of treacherous Edom was the pre-condition for the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Who are these "saviors" who will go up on Mt. Zion? Some explained that these are the two messiahs that will rise to save Israel – messiah son of Joseph, and messiah son of David. Others thought it referred to the "seven shepherds and eight princes" cryptically mentioned by the Prophet Micha (Michea in Italian, 5:4), which, in Talmudic tradition, were identified as King David in the center, Adam, Seth and Methuselah on his right, Abraham, Jacob and Moses on his left. A lineup of mythic heroes, reminiscent of the nine "*prodi*" I saw at Castello della Manta. Others thought it simply meant the judges of Israel, or its leaders, or a reference to the *ushpizin*, the "virtual" guests we invite each year to visit our Sukkah.

7

גבריאל ורפאל מלאכי חסד
אחר שלש תיבות מזכיר השבח
אך בית יהודה רשותם לגשת
אחר שתי תיבות תמוּר הזבח

This quatrain was not translated into Italian by Rabbi Somekh when he prepared the helpful two-page guide to the verses in the synagogue. It is indeed a bit abstruse, not easy to follow, but let's give it a shot.

The Talmudic Sages are holding a little debate about angels (Tractate Chulin 91b:16.) The subject comes up in a discussion of Jacob's dream of the ladder on his way to Mesopotamia, and later, on his return from there, when he wrestled with the angel, whom he, Jacob, would not let go until he blessed him.

We don't really know what the Bible had in mind when it spoke of angels. Usually it meant messengers, who could be human or not. Winged creatures, *seraphim*, or *cherubim*, appear in the visions of Isiah and Ezekiel, but, generally, the notion of angels developed in post-biblical times, and assumed growing importance after the destruction of the second Temple, especially in Jewish mysticism.

This conversation, between Rabbi Hananel and whoever it was who "objected" (and all the others who interjected), would have taken place in Babylonia sometime in the early 4th century CE. It would have been unthinkable in the Bible, some 1000 years earlier:

> For R. Hananel said in the name of Rab: Three divisions of ministering angels sing praises [to the Lord] daily; one proclaims: Holy, the other proclaims: Holy, and the third proclaims: Holy is the Lord of hosts.[19] An objection was raised: Israel are dearer to the Holy One, blessed be He, than the ministering angels, for Israel sing praises to the Lord every hour, whereas the ministering angels sing praises but once a day. (Others say: Once a week; and others say: Once a month; and others say: Once a year; and others say: Once in seven years; and others say: Once in a jubilee; and others say: Once in eternity.) And whereas Israel mention the name of God after two words, as it is said: Hear, Israel, the Lord[20] etc., the ministering angels only mention the name of God after three words, as it is written: Holy, holy, holy, the Lord of hosts. …
>
> (19) Isa. VI, 3, (20) Deut. VI, 4.

The discussion meanders on for a while longer, with additional suppositions and extrapolations. The gist of the argument is that Israel is more privileged than God's own angels, in that in the daily prayer, they are allowed to say His holy name after only two words: (1) Blessed [are] (2) You (3) **Lord*** – bingo! – whereas the angels, who sing His praise in heaven, get to pronounce His name only after three words (1) Holy, (2) Holy, (3) Holy [are You] (4) **Lord.** In other words, Israel beats the angels in the race to be the first to utter God's name, they are therefore closer to God than the angels.

> * Or, alternatively, (1) Hear (2) Israel (3) **the Lord** (4) is one – same idea.

What a strange idea!

I can only imagine it is to be read with a bemused eye, as a playful exchange, totally speculative, a figment of the Rabbis' imagination. The underlying message is one of consolation and encouragement: Despite all evidence to the contrary, even though our Temple has been destroyed, our people are dispersed, and our land has been taken by others, God loves His

people, loves them in their sinful, suffering humanity, more even than his perfect angels.

For the little band of worshippers in Cherasco, this might have been an entertaining enigma, something to figure out in the lulls, which inevitably occur during a long Sabbath or Festival Day service, or something with which to challenge a visitor.

Here is my attempt to render the text of the inscription verbatim, more or less:

> Gabriel and Raphael are angels of mercy
>
> They say [God's] praise after three words
>
> But the House of Judah may approach
>
> After [only] two words, substitutes for the offering.

Prayers, it will be recalled, substitute for the animal sacrifices that used to be offered in the Temple.

Hebrew Letters

Hebrew letters have long held a very special status in Judaism. Their functionality – as the building blocks of words and as an instrument for counting – is only one aspect of their meaning. In over 2000 years of tireless intellectual labor over every word, every iota, every atom of the Holy Scriptures, the letters themselves have been invested with mountains of theological meanings. This esoterica flourishes today on the internet.

Without getting into the theology of Hebrew letters, let us simply note their aesthetics. The script we see on the synagogue's walls is the traditional "Assyrian", or "Aramaic"[6], or "square" type, such as has been used for centuries in handwritten and printed religious texts.

Modern typographers have invented a variety of new fonts. Some have felt that the Latin letters had more of a flexible feel to them, more motion, more freedom. For example, a Hebrew text looks **more horizontal** than a Latin one. Hebrew has only one letter, lamed ל, which sticks its head out above the line, whereas Latin has nine ascenders. Latin script therefore looks

[6] The more ancient Hebrew script, of Phoenician origin was abandoned, apparently at the time of the return from the Babylonian exile (5th century BCE), when the returnees brought back with them this innovation. This, of course, presents a great dilemma: in what font did God write the Tablets of the Law?

longer, maybe a bit freer of motion. Likewise, when the square Hebrew letters are laid out one next to the other, they form an almost unbroken upper line, whereas many of the Latin letters are rounded. Also, the horizontal lines of a Hebrew letter are thicker than its vertical lines, whereas in Latin this is usually the opposite. There are strict halachic rules regarding every organ of the letter, the size relationships between the different organs, etc.

Be that as it may, the Hebrew letters in this synagogue are its chief decorative element, and would be perceived as such, especially by anyone who could not actually read them, chiefly the women, I presume.

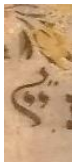
Since the writing is from right to left, the writer's hand would naturally lead him to end a letter with a little upward squiggle, as we see in these serif letters ד ה and also on our walls here. In writing an actual sacred text (which our wall is not), there would also be certain prescribed "**crowns**" (called *tagim*) added to the letters. Certain letters were allotted one *tag*, others were allotted 3 *tagim*, and still others – none. The function of these serifs was mainly to beautify the letters, but, of course, the rabbis could derive various meanings from these, to their heart's delight.

ע

A design problem

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." How then is a scribe supposed to write the Tetragrammaton – the four-letter never-to-be-pronounced name of God?

Scribes throughout the ages have come up with 83 different ways in which to avoid writing God's name.



The most common is to replace it by the use of two *yod*s יי, followed by what looks like a swirly kind of *lamed* ל that has lost a bit of its leg.

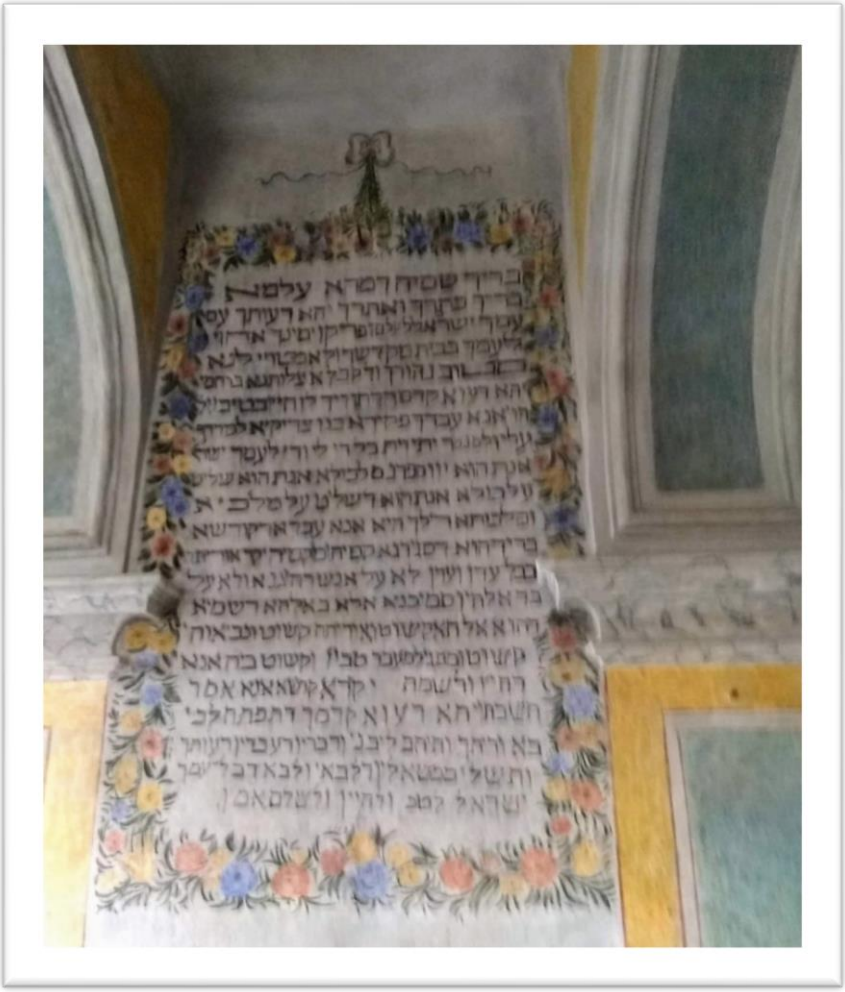
The Decalogue painted on the *aron hakodesh* shows God's name in this form, and the following word – "your God" – also undergoes a similar type of ligature, between the *aleph* א and *lamed* ל.

However, sometimes a pious calligrapher might apply the ligature even where it is not strictly necessary, as in Quatrain No. 1 above, where our poet wags a finger at us: E quandi preghi non ti montar la testa! Here, the Hebrew word

for non, *al*, a perfectly ordinary word, is written with the same letters that make up word *el* (God) and so is presented in ligature.

The closest thing in Latin script to this ligature is the **ampersand** – the logogram **&**, which originated as a ligature of the letters *et* in Latin.

The texts we see in this synagogue are **easily legible**, which would indicate that their primary purpose was to be understood. As far as I can see, they do not strive to be an art form, such as traditional Islamic calligraphy, but simply to provide instruction, inspiration and maybe even entertainment.



The central prayer on the west wall – *Brikh shmé*

This relatively long text is somewhat painfully squeezed into the inadequate available space. Obviously, it was important to have it there, and important to have all of it displayed and legible. Here too, it looks as though the writer was not very experienced with **spacing** the text.

The prayer in **Aramaic** opens with the ceremonious words: *Brikh Shmé di-Mara Alma* (Blessed is the name of the Master of the World. It is said before the reading of the Torah, when the *aron hakodesh* is opened and the Torah scrolls are taken out. Clearly, an intense moment in the synagogue service. The prelude to hearing God's word.

Origin

The prayer appears in the **Book of Zohar**, a Kabbalistic work ascribed by its author in 13th century Spain to Shimon bar Yochai, a rabbi who lived in Judea and the Galilee during the **Roman persecutions** of the 2nd century CE. In the ages of traditional faith, an author would not want to appear as an

innovator; much safer to ascribe his new, sometimes radical, ideas to a venerated old authority. Being original was not a compliment in those days.

The Zohar brings this prayer after "quoting" Bar Yochai's instruction that it should be said when the Torah is taken out of the ark, the reason being that when the congregation opens the holy ark and prepares to take out the Torah, the **gates of heaven open in parallel**. It is, therefore, the most propitious moment for prayers to gain entrance to God's seat. The opening of gates, as we have seen, is a recurring theme in this little room. Not surprising perhaps for a closed Ghetto community.

Without getting into the research on the prayer's authorship and antiquity[7], the more interesting question here is what the Zohar and its mysticism may have meant to the Cherasco community of the 18th century. The **polarization** in post-Biblical Judaism between the **pull of mysticism** and its **rejection** is an on-going human drama, still much in evidence today, and not only in Judaism. The pull of the hidden and the esoteric, the charismatic and mythical, of the encrypted meaning that *must* exist in this incomprehensible world, if we only could find the clues to decipher it, was felt strongly, not only in the Middle Ages when the Zohar was written, but also in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, following the continuous persecutions in Spain and throughout the Counter-reformation.

The rejection kicked in just as strongly after the shocking, shameful collapse of the **messianic movement** of Sabbetai Zvi, who had set the entire Jewish world on fire with the excitement of approaching redemption. His conversion to Islam in 1666 reverberated throughout the 18th century. A lesson of caution and sobriety was learned, but strong undercurrents of messianism continued.

Kabbalistic or not, and notwithstanding objections to its inclusion by some rabbis, this prayer took hold and became an integral part of the liturgy. Today, every synagogue can order via internet a plaque with the

[7] Dr. Avishai Bar-Asher of the Hebrew University has written on the ancient origin of this prayer, which, he shows, **pre-dates the Zohar**. The first printed edition of *Brikh shmé* was published in Mantova in 1558.

text :a simple one made of Perspex for $472, a "luxurious hand carved" version for $4,000.

Its presence on the wall is therefore no proof of kabalistic leanings. There were other prayers that were traditionally painted or affixed on synagogue walls, for the public to recite aloud together, notably, *Modim de-rabanan*. The reason could have been pragmatic – that not everyone possessed a prayer book, or that not everyone read Hebrew and so needed to be "helped along" by reciting it with others. Or, the reason for the prayers on the wall could have been "decorative, declarative, or magical" (Avishai Bar-Asher).

Here, the prayer appears on the western wall, which is not helpful, given that it is recited when facing the open *aron* on the opposite wall. I imagine there was simply no room on the east wall for this long text.

It is an interesting prayer in many ways, of which I will mention only a few.

Articles of faith

Besides blessings and petitions, the prayer contains a declaration of faith, a sort of "credo":

…

Thou art he that feedeth and sustaineth all;

thou art he that ruleth over all;

thou art he that ruleth over kings, for dominion is thine.

…

Not in man do I put my trust,

nor upon **any angel** do I rely,

but upon the God of heaven, who is the God of **truth**,

and whose Teaching is **truth**,

and whose prophets are prophets of **truth**,

and who aboundeth in deeds of goodness and **truth**.

In him I put my trust, and unto his holy and glorious Name I utter praises…

(Hertz *siddur* translation)

You can feel the insistent hammering of the word **truth**. In Aramaic, the word is *keshot*, and it appears four times in a sequence of 11 words – bang, bang, bang, and bang:

דְּהוּא אֱלָהָא קְשׁוֹט וְאוֹרַיְתֵהּ קְשׁוֹט וּנְבִיאוֹהִי

קְשׁוֹט, וּמַסְגֵּא לְמֶעְבַּד טַבְוָן וּקְשׁוֹט.

Bar-Asher, by the way, notes certain resemblances between this prayer and the *kaddish*, and also, he ventures to speculate, to the *Pater Noster*.

Son of God?

One item has attracted particular attention: וְלָא עַל בַּר אֱלָהִין סָמִיכְנָא, which, literally, translates: Nor do I rely on a son of God (*bar elahin*).

Who and what is this "son of God"? Is this a reference to Jesus? Would Jews put such a **provocative declaration** on the wall of their synagogue? Possible, but risky. But then again, was any Christian likely to come up to the top floor of the ghetto building and check the inscriptions? Would any Cherasco priest be able to read them? Unlikely.

The translations and explanations of the 19th and 20th centuries tell us, in a seemingly **apologetic** pitch, that "Son of God" is an expression that was used to refer to **angels** (as in Rabbi Hertz's translation above), and that this is what it means here. Some have argued that Jewish liturgy does not contain references to the specific beliefs of alien faiths. At any rate, this phrase made some rabbis very uncomfortable with the *Brikh Shmé* prayer.

Dr. Avishai Bar-Asher's study of the prayer's evolvement demonstrates that the expression "son of God" is a **copier's corruption** of earlier versions (that had nothing to do with a son of God), which, once it entered into the prayer book, just kept on being reprinted, out of habit. Not theology, then, just plain old ignorance.

Boys

At some time, possibly in the 17th century, a somewhat surprising petition entered the prayer, and it appears here: And give me male sons that perform Your will.

וְתֵיהַב לִי בְּנִין דְּכִרִין דְּעָבְדִין רְעוּתָךְ

Did the Cheraschesi not know it takes both male and female to produce progeny? Did they not remember that "male and female created He them,"

and whatever He gave was to be accepted gratefully? Of course they did. But in a tiny community that could never be sure of having ten adult men for public prayer and Torah reading, perhaps there was particular urgency in ensuring male children.

On the other hand, communal growth would not necessarily have been a good thing in an economy with such severely restricted occupational options. A growing population might even be a danger.

I must conclude, to my regret, without a conclusion. The presence of this petition on the wall may mean nothing more than that it was a matter of routine: it was copied from the prayer book as is, again, without too much thought.

In modern prayer books, this line is often omitted.

Crown

The prayer opens on a solemn, stately, though rather odd, note:

> Blessed be the Name of the Sovereign of the Universe.
>
> Blessed be thy crown and they abiding place.

בְּרִיךְ שְׁמֵהּ דְּמָרֵא עָלְמָא,
בְּרִיךְ כֻּתְרָךְ וְאַתְרָךְ.

What are we blessing here exactly? God's name, the ineffable one, God's crown, and God's abode – this is, surely, the language of mysticism, since none of these terms can be accepted literally in Judaism, as though the Sovereign of the Universe has a name, a home address, and a crown.

Without getting into a sphere in which I am totally out of my depth, I will conclude this section with the speculation: what did the small Cherasco community of the 18th century think of all this?

Was their outlook strictly rabbinic-halachic, or were they sympathetic with kabalistic-mystical yearnings? This question is not as academic as it may sound. As indicated earlier, the chasm between these outlooks – two different answers to the fundamental quandary of Jewish existence – was THE **most divisive issue** in Jewish communities in the late 17th and early 18th centuries: What is the meaning of our painful existence in exile? When and how will it end? What can we do to expedite our salvation, both personal and as a people? Who has the answers?

When they wrote this prayer on the wall, they could not yet know that the new century would bring in its wings two new, unexpected answers: individual **personal** freedom in the diaspora, as formulated by the French Revolution and the subsequent stages of secular Emancipation, and **national** freedom and sovereignty, envisioned by the Zionist movement.

The Jewish world today still encompasses all of these major traditions and programs – Rabbinic, Mystical, Emancipation, and National, in an existence of tension, rivalry, also of mutual enrichment, and above all – in continual flux. Each one of these four responses to the dilemmas of Jewish existence have brought comfort, purpose, and hope to its adherents, but also disappointments and defeats.

Disappointments? It was Abramo De Benedetti who experienced the exhilaration of French liberty most amply; he rose to *consigliere municipale*, and served as an active, sensible and much respected representative on the city council for about a dozen years. And yet, already in 1814, that is, before Napoleon's final defeat, he is heard of no more in its meetings. (Taricco, p. 182).

What followed, we know: re-imposition of the old, nasty restrictions and indignities. Was Napoleon's message of freedom and equality just another of the messianic delusions to which Jews had succumbed throughout history? Surely, even practical, resourceful men like Donato and Abramo De Benedetti must have pondered deeply the meaning of this colossal disappointment.

On the other hand, had Donato and Abramo lived to see the yearned for Statuo Albertino take its effect in 1848, they would soon have faced the sad sight of an empty synagogue, with no Jews left in Cherasco to fill even this small hall. The triumph of personal civic rights gave life to Jews, but killed Jewish life.

What it means to be Jewish today, in Cherasco or anywhere, is a question way beyond the scope of this little essay, and surely beyond the reach of any single answer.