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The *Lulav*: Early Modern Polemical Ethnographies and the Art of Fencing

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Abstract: In recent years, scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to the history of scholarship in general and, more specifically, to the emergence of critical historical and anthropological literature from and within ecclesiastical scholarship. However, few studies have discussed the Jewish figures who took part in this process. This paper analyzes the role played by historiographical and ethnographical writing in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian Jewish–Christian polemics. Tracing various Christian polemical ethnographical depictions of the Jewish rite of shaking the *lulav* (sacramental palm leaves used by Jews during the festival of *Sukkot*), it discusses the variety of ways in which Jewish scholars responded to these depictions or circumvented them. These responses reflect the Jewish scholars’ familiarity with prevailing contemporary scholarship and the key role of translation and cultural transfers in their own attempts to create parallel works. Furthermore, this paper presents new Jewish polemical manuscript material within the relevant contexts, examines Jewish attempts to compose polemical and apologetic ethnographies, and argues that Jewish engagement with critical scholarship began earlier than scholars of this period usually suggest.



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1. Introduction

A compilation of historical works by Jewish scholar Elijah Capsali includes the following story:

At first, Maimonides was living in Cordova, working as the respected royal doctor. One day, during Sukkot, Maimonides left the synagogue holding his *lulav* (a bundle of the Four Species used during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot), as is customary. The king saw him and felt disdain for him. The king said, “What do you have in your hand? Why are you foolishly walking in public in a manner befitting the insane?” Maimonides became angry at the king’s scorn of his religion. He answered: “No, your highness, I am not insane. The insane throw stones. I am following the commandant of Moses and the rites of Jerusalem”. Maimonides cleverly referred to the Muslim rite, according to which they throw stones in Mecca, but the king did not understand. Later, his advisers brought Maimonides’ meaning to his attention, so he decided to kill Maimonides, who fled to Egypt and lived there ever since in great fame (Capsali 1975).

This story provides a unique account of Maimonides’s flight to Egypt, different to all other known versions. Similarly to other stories in Capsali’s volume, it is not found in any other source. Therefore, it is reasonable to presume that Capsali composed it himself. Indeed, this practice was relatively common among sixteenth-century Jewish historians, many of whom penned their own supposedly “factual” stories.¹ Real or imagined, however, this story accords well with Capsali’s wider goal: depicting for his Jewish readers the political reality of a region torn between the Venetian and Ottoman regimes (Shmuelevitz 1978). Self-fashioning himself as a proud Venetian citizen, on the one hand, and recording instances of hatred and exclusion by the city’s Christian majority, on the other², Capsali’s work offers an early insight into Italian Jews’ struggle to achieve legitimacy and stability

under the weight of the Christian gaze (Corazzol 2012). By addressing the potential benefits of living in a somewhat tolerant “free republic” rather than a monarchy, and at the same time also highlighting potential threats, Capsali sought to impart vital political wisdom to his readers (Shmuelevitz 1978). In this case, he appears to respond to a worrisome element of the alien gaze, one which, whether or not Capsali realized it, was swiftly gaining sway in early modern Europe: namely, the Christian interest in Jewish rites.³

The early modern period was characterized by the increasing comparison of various religious rites and concepts, live and extinct, ancient and contemporary. Although this phenomenon had some ancient and medieval origins, its earlier manifestations are incomparable to the mass of detailed works dedicated to the study of beliefs and religious rites in the known world published from the fifteenth century onwards. Anthony Grafton and many other scholars have demonstrated how Renaissance humanism utilized newly discovered classic texts and philological methods to reach novel understandings of antiquity and its enduring influence on contemporaneous religions.⁴ This new historical awareness generated various scholarly attempts to delve deeper into religious history, employing detailed compilations of ancient sources to prove exegetical or polemical points and providing updated knowledge and even practical instructions for dealing with different human groups.⁵

As scholars have noted, this literature also addressed ancient and contemporary Judaism. The shared textual basis and the historical tension between Judaism and Christianity motivated medieval and, even more forcefully, early modern scholars to strive for greater knowledge of the Jewish religion, which could then be employed to sharpen their polemical arguments against Judaism and also to criticize rival Christian traditions and approaches. Indeed, some regarded Jewish knowledge as a reservoir of authentic traditions that the church had lost but should reclaim (Dunkelgrün 2011, 2017; Hardy and Levitin 2019).

One example of this phenomenon, which is at the heart of the current paper, is the growing Christian interest in the Jewish festival of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles, Scenofegia). As Carl Nothaft has shown, Protestant reformers argued that according to the true meaning of the biblical verses, Jesus was born at *Sukkot*, which normally falls in September, and not in December, thus suggesting a reform of the traditional dating of Christmas, or even its cancelation. Meanwhile, opponents sought to demonstrate the irrelevance of this festival to Christian tradition (Nothaft 2011). This perhaps contributed to Christian writers’ critical interest in *Sukkot*.

However, this new focus was not only a matter of inter-denominational polemics. It also left traces in the vast library of Jewish–Christian polemics—on both sides. Although early modern polemics continued to focus largely on common medieval themes—such as the question of Jesus’ messianism, biblical interpretations of specific verses, and whether Jews are the enemies of Christianity⁶—it would be wrong to assume that the increasing emphasis on historical and comparative analysis, characteristic of Renaissance thought, left this fertile literary field unaffected. Indeed, an examination of works composed in eighteenth-century Italy sheds light on how early modern historical and ethnographical works affected Jewish–Christian polemics. While existing scholarship on eighteenth-century Jewish-Italian polemical works is far from comprehensive (Malkiel 2004; Lasker 1994), the current paper does not seek to provide a comprehensive review of this literature and its affinity to wider trends in early modern European scholarship. Rather, it examines one example of Christian historical-ethnographical-based mockery of a Jewish rite—the shaking of the *lulav*—and presents four different Jewish literary responses to it. These replies demonstrate a Jewish awareness of the novel ways in which the majority society perceived aspects of their religion, based on both interpersonal contacts with Christians and a sustained engagement with contemporary non-Jewish works.

In studying Jewish responses to Christian depictions of the rite of the *lulav*, this paper aims to achieve three primary goals. First and foremost, it presents the Jewish voices that responded to the often hostile early modern Christian historians and ethnographers. While significant studies regarding ethnographies of Jews (especially in German- and

Dutch-speaking contexts) have appeared in recent decades,⁷ they rarely discuss Jewish counterreactions. By contrast, this study will initially survey the relevant Italian literature and analyze the Jewish literary responses to it.⁸

Second, contemporary scholars debate to what extent Jewish–Christian polemics changed during the early modern period. I refer here, for example, to the argument between Talya Fishman and Daniel Lasker regarding whether works such as Leon Modena’s *Magen vaHerev* represent a new path in Jewish–Christian polemics. While I find Lasker’s criticism of Fishman’s affirmative answer to the question convincing, I suggest that this examination of new material in its context will improve our understanding of the interpretative mechanisms that enabled the discourse to change, thus facilitating a more nuanced formulation of an answer to this question (Fishman 2003; Lasker 2006; Facchini 2019).

Third, this study will endeavor to fill a lacuna in the history of Jewish critical (historical-philological) scholarship. As Dimitri Levitin has shown, the rise of critical scholarship in the European “republic of letters” is often perceived as the work of a few famous martyrs rather than a gradual shift pursued by many actors via various literary genres (many of which relate to confessional polemics) throughout the early modern period (Levitin 2012). By examining the example of the *lulav*, I wish to explore in a preliminary fashion the relevance of Levitin’s description to Jewish historiography. For example, according to many, Italian Jews began to engage with critical historical scholarship during the nineteenth century, the best-known example being the work of scholar Samuel David Luzzato (Shadal).⁹ Perhaps a closer look at the eighteenth century and its scholarly occupations will offer a more nuanced view of the novelty of his legacy, accompanied by a firmer contextualization of the Jewish Italian enlightenment in early modernity.¹⁰

2. The *Lulav*

A presentation of my case study must necessarily begin by examining the commandment regarding the *lulav*. According to rabbinic tradition, Leviticus 40:23 dictates that on the first day of Tabernacles, a festival on which Jews build small branch-covered huts, and dwell in them for seven days, one must gather a citrus fruit (*etrog*), a palm branch (*lulav*), three myrtle branches (*hadass*), and two willow branches (*aravah*). These are to be taken to the synagogue, during the morning prayers, and shaken in six directions (north, south, east, west, up, and down) while reciting verses from Psalms.¹¹ Some versions of these rites caught the eye of classic authors such as Plutarch and Tacitus, who viewed the rite as related to the worship of the god Bacchus. Indeed, the feast in his honor, the Bacchanalia, included the ceremonial presentation of plants.¹² These classic interpretations influenced how early modern Christians later perceived the *lulav* within their general discussions of the Jewish religion, as well as its past, present, and future place in Europe. The rite is also mentioned in the New Testament, albeit in a largely neutral manner. Both Luke and Matthew noted that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, he was greeted by Jews holding a *lulav* and crying “Ozahna”, a word also used in the rabbinic *Sukkot* prayers.¹³ In late antiquity, Catholic Easter ceremonies of Palm Sunday commemorating Jesus’s entrance often employed different kinds of plants for this rite, such as olive branches, and the different times of year at which the rites were performed further undermined their similarities (Pierce 1999). Medieval polemical sources largely ignored the alleged similarity between these rites and their common historical origin, which could have been used to emphasize polemical points. For example, even a compendium of polemics such as *Sefer Nitsahon* (early fifteenth century) dedicates only one sentence to the *lulav*, referring the reader to a ritual poem that provides the conventional Talmudic explanations for this commandment (Muhlhaue 1644). However, this gradually changed in the early modern period.

3. Early Modern Christian Mockery of the *Lulav*

A full genealogical survey of how the *lulav* was mocked and became a polemical trope within the changing Christian literature is beyond the scope of this study. Here I will

only highlight three recurring motifs mentioned by a representative collection of Christian Italian authors in their discussions of *Sukkot* and the *lulav*, which will serve as a background for a more detailed analysis of Jewish responses to them or others similar to them. While, of course, not all these sources are intentionally polemic, all relate to the notion of the “blind synagogue”, according to which Jews foolishly deny Christian messianism while clinging to an ancient law that had been corrupted over time, or accusations of Jewish violence against the majority culture.¹⁴

The first motif identifies *Sukkot* with pagan agricultural fests. Though Christian theology acknowledged the divine origin of the biblical commandments, early church figures addressed the divine accommodation of paganism, a topic that was heatedly debated well into the modern period (Benin 1993). Comparing *Sukkot* to impure pagan feasts such as the bacchanalia supported the case for Christian neglect of this festival and its rites and against the Jewish perpetuation of it.

In 1517, shortly after Capsali arrived in Venice, Venetian scholar Caelius Rhodiginus (born Lodovico Ricchieri, 1469–1525) printed his famous *Antiquarum Lectionum* at the Aldine Press (Bietenholz and Deutscher 2003). In this rich collection of notes on classic authors, we find an early example of the trope of the *lulav* as a pagan rite. Following Plutarch, and adding some flavor to his description, Rhodiginus portrays Jewish holidays as dedicated to wild drinking. He highlights *Sukkot* specifically, emphasizing that the religious celebration of Scenofegia, the Greek name for *Sukkot*, much resembles the bacchanalia (Rhodiginus 1516). Later, Rodolphus Hospinianus (1547–1626), in his *Historia sacramentaria* (1598), also repeated Plutarch’s account, describing a Jewish feast during which huts are built and plants placed before the altar as a version of the bacchanalia (Hospinianus 1598). Members of the clergy were also interested in this idea, though they approached it with caution. From around 1630, the famous Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) devoted much effort to discerning affinities between Egyptian cults and the Bible. Kircher did not hesitate to argue that “The Hebrews have such an affinity to the rites, sacrifices, ceremonies and sacred disciplines of the Egyptians that I am fully persuaded that either the Egyptians were Hebraicizing or the Hebrews were Egypticizing” (Stolzenberg 2004). He also applied this view to explain the origin of the *lulav*. In his *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (1650), which included a suggested translation for the inscription on the obelisk in Piazza Navona, Rome, Kircher mentioned *Sukkot* as an example of an ancient holiday involving the ritual presentation of branches, similar to Egyptian and Greek customs (Kircher 1650).

Likewise, the Venetian apostate Giulio Morosini (born Samuel ben David Nahmias, 1612–1683), who composed an extensive work on Jewish rites and customs, was an inspiring source for anti-Jewish polemicists. In his detailed account of *Sukkot*, Morosini did not allude to a specific pagan origin of *Sukkot*, but he did mention Jewish sources connecting the *lulav* to prayers for water, commenting that since there is nothing directly linking the four species with water, the *lulav* ceremony is comparable to the rites of “other nations” (i.e., pagan nations) that used superstitious signs to forecast the weather (Morosini 1683).

The vast library of early modern ecclesiastical history contains numerous further identifications of *Sukkot* with forms of paganism. According to the influential *Notizia de’ vocaboli ecclesiastici*, by Roman historian Domenico Magri (1604–1672), for instance, “Plutarch reports that the Jews celebrated this holiday in honor of Bacchus.” (Margi 1650). His contemporary, the Jesuit historian Nicolas Talon (1605–1691), also quoted this idea, though disapprovingly (Talon 1649). Later, French Benedictine monk Bernard de Montfaucon (1655–1741), who lived in Italy for some time and was an influential antiquarian, asserted that *Sukkot* was connected to an Athenian celebration of the goddess Demeter. Another late-seventeenth-century example is Spencer’s argument concerning the Greek and Egyptian origins of the *lulav* (discussed further below), which was directly quoted by a Jewish scholar. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, this notion was discussed and quoted repeatedly in historical literature, both with confidence and skepticism.¹⁵

However, the view of the *lulav* as an impure superstition was not necessarily dependent on a reading of ancient sources. A second trope in many ethnographical Italian works

is the *lulav* as an object that facilitates magical communication with demonic powers, either to summon destructive forces or to gain protection from them. Morosini, for instance, mocked the Jews for poking each other's eyes during the ceremony, adding that Jews foolishly believe the *lulav* is capable of chasing away demons (Morosini 1683). Luigi Maria Benetelli (1641–1725), who engaged in manifold polemics with Jews and received some written replies from rabbinic leaders (Benayahu 1980), wrote more explicitly about the *lulav*. His work *I dardi rabbinici infranti* (1705) mocks all the commandments as superstitions, citing in brief the example of the *lulav* (Benetelli 1705). However, in an earlier work, *Le Saette di Gionata* (1703), after discussing the words of Balam, the biblical pagan magician, Benetelli quotes a sermon given by the medieval mystical commentator Bahya ben Asher (1255–1340) and accuses the Jews of praying for the destruction of Rome and Christianity while they circle the altar with the *lulav* during the feast of Tabernacles. While he does not mention pagan gods, Benetelli explicitly ridicules the rite and accuses its practitioners of violent anti-Christian gestures (Benetelli 1703). The apostate Paulo Medici followed this line in his well-known *Riti e Costumi degli ebrei* (Medici 1736), quoting ben Asher and describing the shaking of the *lulav* as representing the wielding of a sword against Christianity.¹⁶ He added angrily that “they do so despite our graces towards them”.¹⁷

Aside from Benetelli's slight misreading of ben Asher's text, which only speaks about the Jews “being saved from the four kingdoms” and does not mention the destruction of the kingdoms, it is also interesting to note a small yet revealing mistake in this work. Benetelli, like other Christian authors, understands that olive branches can be used in the *lulav*. This false assertion clearly stems from a rudimentary acknowledgment of a connection between the mocked *lulav* and Palm Sunday, on which olive branches were regularly used. Even when mocking the Jewish rite, the complicated connections between the two traditions are inadvertently acknowledged (Benetelli 1703, p. 206).

These descriptions are similar to an earlier portrayal by Johannes Buxtorf, who, although a Protestant, was well known in Italy and probably influenced later scholars.¹⁸ His *De Synagoga Judaica* (the first German edition of which was published in Basel in 1603) provides a detailed description of the various rites practiced at *Sukkot*, arguing that the shaking of the *lulav* by the “apish Jews” is a superstitious act intended to make noise and chase away the devil. He also notes that this action resembles the violent maneuvers of fencing, which he views as directed against Christian society.¹⁹

A third recurring motif in this literature, highlighting the violence expressed by the waving of the sword-like *lulav*, is the presentation of Tabernacles as a holiday commemorating the destruction of Jericho by Joshua. Numerous early modern historiographers, among them Tommaso Garzoni (1549–1589) (Garzoni [1586] 1605), Stefano Menochio (1575–1655) (Menochio 1692), and Gian Pietro Bergantini (1685–1760) (Bergantini 1745), mention the fall of this city as a focal and sometimes even exclusive²⁰ reason for celebrating *Sukkot*.

Although a Jewish tradition links the ritual circuits of the altar with the circuits of Jericho before its conquest, I have not found any Jewish source that explicitly connects *Sukkot* with the commemoration of this specific conquest.²¹ Thus, it is possible that this hyper-emphasis of a marginal tradition indicates a general Christian concern vis-à-vis Jewish violence, as is also expressed in connection with other feasts, such as Purim and Passover (Horowitz 2006; Yuval 2006).

All these sources by various authors share the same focus. In addition to the descriptions concentrating on rabbinic texts, they include a set of new depictions that focus on genealogies or contemporary reports of customary Jewish acts, clearly reflecting the typical early modern emphasis on historical and anthropological analyses. As will be discussed further below, Italian Jews were aware of the literature that utilized these tropes and responded to them in a variety of ways.

4. Seventeenth-Century Jewish Responses

An awareness of these perceptions is evident in an early modern version of midrashic supplements to the book of Esther. The work, which adapts its content to the European Christian context, places the following words in the mouth of Haman, an iconic Jew-hater:

And on the 15th day of the month of Tishrei they cover their tabernacles with branches. They go out to our fields to cut our palm trees for “*lulav*” as well as citrons and willows. While doing so, they destroy our fields, yank branches, and show no mercy. They create their “Hoshana” and say: “As the king does in his warfare—So do we”. Then they go into their synagogues, read their books, celebrate, circle the building with the Hoshana, while jumping and hopping like goats. We do not know if they curse us or bless us. They call this holiday *Sukkot* ...²²

This unfavorable description portrays the holiday as far more than a temporary civic inconvenience. Invoking themes such as the destruction of agriculture, the association between the *lulav* and weapons, and above all the depiction of the celebrating Jews as leaping goats (an animal often affiliated with Bacchus), the Jewish author vividly echoes the common Christian perception of *Sukkot* as something between a reckless superstition and Jewish bacchanalia. The annual display of ecstatic malice accompanied by hints of repressed aspirations for armed rebellion is one of the key points in this Christian Haman’s argument that all Jews should be eliminated. This short extract illustrates that Jews were aware of these Christian perceptions and feared the gaze of modern “Hamans” who based their harmful intentions on them.

Some seventeenth-century Italian Jewish scholars addressed the mockery of Jewish rites, directly and indirectly. Rabbi Leon Modena, in his Italian work *Historia degli Riti Hebraici* (1637), tended to present Jewish interpretations without a great deal of polemic (Cohen 1972). In the case of the *lulav*, he briefly describes the rite and rephrases classic Talmudic explanations. In a private letter, he reflected on this, stating that it constituted a direct response to Buxtorf and that his reply concentrated on “the essential aspects, leaving aside those which even our own *ingengo* [those endowed with understanding] consider superstitions”.²³

Two other rabbis who were also well-versed in non-Jewish literature addressed the same issue. The head of the rabbinic court in Venice, Simone Luzzato (1583–1663), composed a work defending the Jewish faith, Jewish civil behavior, and the important role played by Jews in the Venetian economy. Rather than engaging in direct polemics with his Christian contemporaries, Luzzato cites Tacitus’s account of the Jewish rite, including the classic author’s remark: “After having narrated that a golden vine had been found in the Temple the priests had the custom of crowning themselves with ivy and playing various musical instruments, it was initially believed that these Jews adored Bacchus”.²⁴ Luzzato uses this to attack the notion that Jewish celebrations are superstitious and that they disrespect their sacred places. Though his arguments are directed at Tacitus, it is quite clear that this polemic, part of a political appeal to the Venetian rulers, in fact responds to more contemporary usages of common anti-Jewish depictions, such as those quoted above. The unconvinced polemical responses to his tract further exemplify that invoking Tacitus was a tool in the contemporary debate. Indeed, they ignore Luzzato’s reflections on Tacitus’s text and continue to mock other aspects of Jewish law (Ravid 1982).

Another Italian Jewish author, philosopher, and physician, Yitzhak Cardoso, remarked that:

The holy feast of *Sukkot*, which is celebrated with palm trees [*lulav*] and tree branches [*Sukkah*], was not dedicated to Bacchus, as Plutarch mistakenly thought. Rather it was celebrated in honor of the redeemer of Israel and the creator of the world, who guided His people in the desert protected by clouds while they were sitting in tents and tabernacles.²⁵

The traditional Talmudic explanation is used here against the ancient author, once more responding to the many early modern scholars who utilized his words to describe Jewish rites as foolish pagan superstitions.

Luzzato and Cardoso both employed their comprehensive knowledge of Christian sources to defend Jewish tradition, refuting accusations in a manner characteristic of Jewish–Christian polemics. Namely, they quote an opposing source and offer an alternative interpretation of the point raised, while portraying the opposing view as a preposterous misunderstanding.

At times, Jews revealed more than a simple awareness of this discourse. Indeed, members (and former members) of Jewish communities actively employed the motif of mocking the *lulav*. One example is Uriel de Acosta, a *marrano* who left Portugal for Amsterdam, where he openly returned to Judaism, only to find himself disappointed with rabbinic tradition. In the 1623 version of his work *Exame das tradições phariseas* (Examination of Pharisaic Traditions), he dedicated a chapter to the *lulav*, writing:

The tradition which is provided to explain this law is false. It claims that the Law prescribes to take a citron, which is a beautiful fruit, as well as branches of certain other trees, and with these in hand to make movements and thrusts . . . And God tells the one who plays such games and makes such inventions before Him without His authorization, to be gone from His sight, because He cannot abide it . . . The branches, then, were intended for the construction of booths and not at all for carrying about or for practicing the art of fencing. (Da Costa 1993)

Acosta ridicules the rabbinic tradition allegedly via an independent reading of the biblical text. However, the next paragraph, in which he adds that the true meaning of the term “a beautiful tree” is the olive tree, relating it to the “tree of knowledge” in heaven, seems to respond directly to the Christian replacement of the *lulav* with olive branches. Although often depicted as “religiously unaffiliated”, this case, among others, reveals the enduring effect of Acosta’s Christian education on his polemical campaign against Rabbinic Judaism.²⁶

A similar criticism is found in the heretical book *Qol Sakal* (*The Voice of the Fool*), which attacks the oral law.²⁷ Its anonymous author remarks that “the commandment to take palms and other species for the joy of the holiday was only for the time of the temple. And the usage of these specific plants was not obligatory. The verse mentions these only because they are easily found in Jerusalem” (Reggio 1852). While this work expresses more moderate criticism, its downplay of the rabbinic tradition expressed in this passage was probably fueled also by the views of the surrounding Christian environment, alongside its ‘Karaitic’ sources (Rustow 2007). Another example, albeit from the Polish lands, is found in the diary of Jacob Frank (1726–1791) (Maciejko 2011). There, he mentions that, according to his father, while still a boy he gathered gentile boys and girls and showed them how to shake the *lulav*. At this moment, his father—so Frank writes—knew that “a time will come the Jews will leave their religion and join the other nations”.²⁸ Leaving the exact meaning of this curious passage aside, the Franks seem to have viewed an interaction between Jews and gentiles around a *lulav* as a sign that Christianity would be victorious over Judaism. This perhaps indicates an internalization of Christian mockery or invokes the mentions of the *lulav* in the New Testament, expressing a wish to reclaim this symbol.²⁹

It is now time to turn to the eighteenth century, when the development of both critical scholarship and the Jewish awareness of historical and polemical literature reached new heights. The following selection of Jewish Italian 18th century sources dealing with the *lulav* further exemplifies this awareness and the various ways in which Jews ‘talked back’ to derogatory images of them and their sacred holidays and rites.

5. “As Even the Christians Admit”—Aviad Shar Shalom Basilea

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Italian Kabbalists’ awareness of the aforementioned sources was accompanied by dissatisfaction with the existing Jewish responses. One of the most influential Italian Kabbalists, Benyamin Vitali of Reggio (1650–1730),

opened a sermon for Sukkot in a remarkable way, asserting that “the commandment of the *lulav* is baffling, why did the Lord command us to take these and not more common plants found around us?” (Vitali 1727). Thus, he possibly alluded to the Christian usage of olive branches, a supposedly more reasonable choice in the Italian climate.³⁰ His student, Yesha’yahu Bassan (1673–1739), devoted the sermons he gave at this festival to explaining the commandments of the holiday in the face of disparaging remarks made by Christians and Jews alike. He argues that the explanations provided by the Talmud for the commandment of building the Tabernacle and shaking the *lulav* (which were also invoked by Cardoso) are so odd and unconvincing that they must be false and were only given to direct one’s mind to the deeper Kabbalistic meaning.³¹

Another of Vitali’s students, Mantuan rabbi Aviad Shar Shalom Basilea (1680–1749), offers a fascinating response.³² Basilea’s *’Emunat chakhamim (Faith in the Sages)* is a witty defense of Kabbalah that uses the Cartesian skepticism and astronomical knowledge the author acquired in his secular studies.³³ Basilea’s work is mainly occupied with criticizing Jews who turn to natural philosophy. “Two ways are to our disadvantage—direct exegesis and the natural explanation”, he remarks at the beginning of the work. Later, he condemns any engagement with non-Kabbalistic works, including classic Jewish philosophy, thus suggesting a deliberate restriction of the Jewish library.³⁴

The latter part of the work tackles the issue of disrespect towards the commandments. In so doing, the author presents a list of cases he deems most worthy of elaboration, hoping the reader will subsequently succeed in applying the principles to other cases.³⁵ The very first case presented is the rite of the *lulav*. Basilea’s approach to this matter is baffling. He acknowledges that all commandments are alien to human reason, asserting that the only way to understand them is via the esoteric teachings of Kabbalah. To strengthen his case, he highlights the work of none other than Pietro Galtino (1460–1530), a Christian scholar who argued that rabbinic traditions hold some valuable religious secrets, albeit amidst much nonsense (Horbury 2016). Like other Jews, Basilea discerned the polemical opportunities offered by such an argument and invokes this work in arguing for a consensus on the religious value of Jewish esotericism. He admits that while the *lulav* may indeed seem odd to the ignorant onlooker, a wiser and more pious person will be able to acquire an understanding of this commandment. He will grasp the symbolic meaning of each plant and its correspondence with a celestial force, and he will appreciate the spiritual effects caused by the regulated shaking of these plants, which correspond to the four winds.

This rhetorical move is by no means trivial. Jewish authors were familiar with Galatino’s book, and some clearly understood it as an attempt to use the affirmation of Talmudic fables as missionary bait (Guetta 2014, pp. 135–42). Even those who employed the work in a polemical fashion did so largely to defend the Talmud rather than the Kabbalistic explanations of the commandments. Basilea’s book, however, goes further, promoting a perception of Kabbalah as traditional, stable knowledge, while philosophic theology distorts itself by constant paradigm shifts. While Basilea’s explanation is not new and can be found in several medieval Kabbalistic works, his turn to Christian literature and use of historical means to establish the validity of the Kabbalistic tradition exemplifies how Jewish polemicists employed both historiographical and comparative tools and thus is highly relevant to the main argument of this paper.

6. Striking Back: Shaul Merari, Yona Rappa, and Moshe David Valle

I turn now to three Jews who were probably very familiar with the use of historical literature in religious and inter-denominational polemics and imitated it to attack Christianity. Somewhat in contrast with the corresponding Christian literature, it is quite clear that the main goal of these works was not to impart information. Indeed, Jews, as the minority, were well acquainted with Christian ceremonies. Rather, the works that will be examined here reveal a clear intent to attack various aspects of Christianity and depict that religion in a most unfavorable fashion, at times inverting the common Christian criticism

of Jews. Furthermore, the presence of these inverted arguments suggests that the works responded to the literature reviewed above.

In the early eighteenth century, a Jewish scribe named Shaul Merari³⁶ penned a fictional polemical dialogue between a Catholic priest and a Jew.³⁷ Although parts of the work are dedicated to common polemical arguments—regarding the interpretation of biblical verses and contradictions—the work as a whole reveals a new awareness of the modern tools of textual criticism. While earlier Jewish polemical works such as Yehuda Baniel's work commonly known as *She'elot* (*Questions on the New Testament*) (Horbury 1993) attacked the coherence of the New Testament, Merari critically focuses on the historical fabric in which the text was created. Thus, the figure of the Jew asks how Paul was able to write letters in different languages to the various ancient churches and demands that he be allowed to see the original scripts of the synoptic gospels. He also notes that the pun regarding Peter as the cornerstone of the church, which makes sense in Greek, could not have been used by the Hebrew-speaking Jesus. He likewise includes a detailed discussion regarding the Christian day of rest (Sunday), saints' days, and their historical connections to pagan European traditions. These points, among others, lead him to conclude that the text is a successful fraud.

The skepticism regarding the foundations of the New Testament, as well as the endeavor to create a detailed historical narrative describing the Christianization of pagan Europe, is a relatively novel aspect of this work. In this context, the Jew, at times humorously, ironically mentions Christianity's perception of the Jewish rites as "superstitions", directing the same accusation at Christianity.

The text reveals an interest in the Christian practice of biblical commandments and in highlighting affinities between Christianity and paganism.³⁸ The *lulav* serves him as one of the few examples of rites that early Christianity abandoned in an attempt to appeal to pagan Europe.³⁹ Indeed, he reads the aforementioned mentions of the *lulav* in the New Testament as confirming his narrative of Christianity—a distorted version of Judaism that surrendered to paganism and was corrupted by it.

A similar, yet even more militant, line of argumentation appears in a manuscript entitled *Pilpul 'al zman zmanaim u'zmaneiheim* (Belasco 1908) (*An Argumentation Concerning Festival, Festivals, and their Festivals*) by Yonah Rappa,⁴⁰ written circa 1730.⁴¹ Styled as a parody of the Jewish *Haggadah* (the text recited during the Passover Seder, the festive meal), this work in fact describes the ceremonies of Easter.⁴² It begins by mocking the custom of the carnival and its immoral traditions, juxtaposing it with the loud and emotional lamentation of sins during Lent and thus casting doubt on the sincerity of the process. The same motif recurs throughout the work. The author describes the fasts and sermons, yet he remarks that only the poor actually fast while the wealthy find a way to avoid this inconvenience to their daily lives (Belasco 1908, pp. 2–5). Such remarks are followed by a lengthy description of the Easter parade, describing the different kinds of groups that participate in it.⁴³ This piece of polemical ethnography recalls a famous analysis of the description of a religious parade in Montpellier by the cultural historian of eighteenth-century France, Robert Darnton. Darnton argued that the author of this description wished to present himself and his environment to the reader by depicting the hierarchical layers of the city as in a parade (Darnton 1984), because the "procession served as a traditional idiom for urban society".⁴⁴ Yet, while Darnton argues that this portrait of the parade is the effort of an eighteenth-century author to praise the contemporaneous social order, Rappa, although impressed by the parade, uses a similar descriptive modus to express the pride he feels in his detachment from the celebrating masses.

In addition to the descriptive section and the conventional questions undermining Christian theology, the author applies his historical knowledge, combining it with his general endeavor to mirror Christian mockery. A Jewish Aramaic poem named *Had Gadya* (literally "One Goat"), which is recited at the end of the Passover feast, serves as a useful tool in achieving this literary goal.⁴⁵ In Rappa's hands, the unlucky goat in the original song becomes Jesus (as the *Agnus Dei*), and the ongoing violence between the figures of the song

mirrors the violent history of Christianity. The author reveals his knowledge concerning the Christianization of Britain and Ireland as well as many other phases in church history. Notably, he mentions the book *Stati del mondo* (Renieri 1682), which covers the history of many European kingdoms and seems to be the source of some of this knowledge.⁴⁶ His version of *Had Gadya* ends with a story about the murder of missionaries in China due to the intolerance of the “Chinese emperors who loathed the Christian teachings”.⁴⁷ A careful reading reveals that this account mirrors the anti-Jewish traits of Christian works: all Christians described in his short but detailed history are motivated by lust and greed, and they seem to be in constant disagreement. The most enlightening example of Rappa’s rhetorical approach is his interest in Christian missionaries. A powerful argument for the superiority of Christianity was its success in disseminating faith in the bible, in both ancient and modern times. In his well-known missionary Hebrew work *Shvilei Tohu* (1539), the apostate Gerard Veltwyck (1505–1555) mentioned this as a reason for conversion (Veltwyck 1539). By contrast, Rappa depicts the mission to the East as a complete failure, and completes his history by hinting that all missionaries to the East were killed by the locals, a fact he probably knew to be false.

This polemical use of history and detailed ethnography, while mirroring anti-Jewish literature, is well exemplified in Rappa’s account of the *lulav*:

At first, their priests would take the four species on the first day of Sukkot while entering and exiting the church dressed in their impure clothes. The crowd would do so at home. When the number of sinners among them grew so great, the Lord punished them so that the land could not grow the species. Then they changed the tradition and used olive branches instead . . . (Belasco 1908, p. 7)

This largely imaginative historical reconstruction is clearly intended to make a polemical point. Not only is the Jewish interpretation of *Sukkot* the most accurate, but the Christians themselves used to acknowledge this. They only stopped doing so for historical reasons. As a result of divine punishment, the original holy ceremony became corrupted. This was part of an effort to conceal the divine wrath that prevented them from properly preserving the biblical rite. It is no coincidence that this mirrors exactly the way many Christian polemicists depicted the Jewish situation, arguing that punishment and exile had corrupted Jewish religious traditions. It also refers to how difficult it was to acquire palm branches in Italy, a fact that was used when questioning the relevance of this rite, as Vitali noted. According to Rappa’s account, these trees are not found in Christian lands because the Christian owners of the land are unworthy of them. Yet, nevertheless, the Jews manage to maintain the sacred tradition. Rappa does not seem to want to respond directly to the Christian arguments, as Basilea and Segre (see below) did. Rather, his work is intended to entertain Jews while showing (Hebrew readers) that both sides could play this game of ridicule.

Another Jew who chose a somewhat similar path was Rabbi Moshe David Valle (1696–1777), a Kabbalist and a student at the University of Padua. His many volumes (which were only printed recently) reveal his creativity and his interest in history and Christian theology. Like Rappa, he seems aware of the degrading discourse about Jewish rites and his writing reflects an attempt to mirror it. His approach expands Basilea’s idea (of which he probably was aware), with the addition of Rappa’s argumentation.

A full introduction to Valle’s complicated version of the Lurianic Kabbalah is beyond the scope of this paper, so my account here will necessarily be simplified.⁴⁸ From the Middle Ages, Jewish descriptions of Christianity debated whether Christian religious symbols possessed some kind of spiritual power, however misguided, or were completely vain and superstitious.⁴⁹ Like many Kabbalists, Valle subscribed to the former view. He assumed that Christianity holds divine power, given to it as part of the complicated divine messianic process of *Tiqqun*. Christians are unaware of this process, but their angelic patron (*Sar*) ensures that they will receive a remnant of divine power through rites connected to the heavenly secrets of Kabbalah (Valle 1998). Thus, the mourning days of Lent are an unconscious Christian preparation for their sorrow during the judgment day, which will

coincide with the Jewish Passover.⁵⁰ They place ash on their heads because of a Talmudic saying, “They will be the dust under the foot of the righteous after the judgment day”,⁵¹ and the round dish in which they place the bread before Communion is a reference to the Talmudic story in which Jesus is depicted in a cauldron full of dung (Valle 1998, p. 59). Similar explanations are offered for the carnival masks used before Easter and the clothes worn by the clergy.⁵² Even the degrading mark that Christians compelled the Jews to wear has a hidden theological significance.

This Kabbalistic interpretation of Jewish and Christian rites is also applied to the *lulav*. According to the author, the shaking of the *lulav* is an act that “removes the crown from the head of Esau (=Christianity) and places it back in its proper place, in Israel’s hands”.⁵³ His meaning becomes clearer when looking at the juxtaposing manner in which he describes the *lulav* and the Christian Easter parade in which a replica of the dead Jesus on the cross is presented. The *lulav* he describes as a ceremony performed quietly while hidden inside the *sukkah*,⁵⁴ which brings blessings to the world. The Easter ceremony, in contrast, also involves a sacral presenting of flora, but is presented as public, noisy, and bringing death into the world.⁵⁵ Valle’s descriptions of the two rites mirror each other; one is presented as stemming from the tree of life, while the other represents the demonic powers of Satan, the “other side”. However, Valle finds a hidden spark even in this public display of the crucified: it fulfills the biblical saying to Esau, “You shall serve your brother”. The Hebrew verb “to serve”, תַּעֲבֹד, can also mean worship, and Valle sees the sanctification of the cross as worshiping “one of our brethren” (Valle 1998, p. 97), thus anticipating the future conversion of all Christians to the true faith. The *lulav* is also presented by him as symbolizing the same process, while put a bit differently: “the meaning of the *lulav* is a gradual revelation . . . like the rose which is at first ‘bocolo’⁵⁶ (=lit. curled) and only later shows out as a rose. First, things are concealed, only later they shall show out . . . and so the evils themselves will see our victory in the end of days . . . ”.⁵⁷ Both rites, according to Valle, hint to the same Messianic process, though the Christian rite does so unintentionally.

Such an interpretive method could well have been inspired by arguments that prevailed in Christian writing since the advent of humanism. As Anthony Grafton has shown, for centuries scholars had cited connections between pagan rites and Jewish and Christian customs. However, it could be suggested that a more concrete context inspired Valle. As Peter Burke remarks:

Protestant reformers described Catholic practices as pre-Christian survivals, comparing the cult of the Virgin Mary to the cult of Venus, for instance, and describing the saints as the successors of the pagan gods and heroes, taking over their functions of curing illness and protecting from danger. St George, for example, was identified as a new Perseus, St Christopher as a second Polyphemus. Both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic or Counter Reformation may be regarded as, among other things, movements of de-hybridization or counter-hybridization . . . (Burke 2009)

This is also a fitting description of the vast library of Protestant scholarship attacking both Catholics and Jews, some of which Valle probably encountered in his many years of study in the *Collegio Veneto Artista*, where he studied among a few other Jews and many other non-Catholics who could not study in the main college due to their refusal to take a Catholic oath (Carlebach 2001). Kabbalistic views of Christianity are almost as old as Kabbalah itself (Haskell 2016). However, Valle’s decision to engage in an effort to systematically decode many Christian rites using Kabbalistic concepts is innovative and particularly relevant to the notion of hybridity suggested by Burke, and to Grafton’s point regarding the role comparison played in early modern religious scholarship. Valle’s acknowledgement that there existed some sort of remote common ground between the traditions served as an interpretive key. It allowed him to reveal the righteousness of Judaism through the impurity of Christianity, thus advancing learned and nuanced polemical blasphemy in the style of the “polemical ethnography” common at the time.

To conclude this section, while Rappa offered largely satirical descriptions for the reader's amusement, Valle seems to have penned learned observations for a small circle of Kabbalists, and Merari apparently combined the two approaches. All three writers were clearly familiar with the early modern Latin and Italian bookshelf, its turn to historical and anthropological scholarship, and its use in polemics. More precisely, the three authors did not seek to refute the Christian arguments by addressing their assumptions and details directly. Rather, they were interested in applying their approach in order to fire back. Using various literary styles, they gave their readers new intellectual ammunition, accompanied by a smirk or even a laugh.

7. 'This Is in Vain': Yehoshua Segre and the Buds of Toleration?

Scholars have discerned certain changes in the legal status of Jews in eighteenth-century Italy, which were sometimes accompanied by a more tolerant attitude to Judaism as a neighboring minority religion (Bregoli 2017; Luciano 1993; Malkiel 2004, pp. 53–58). A significant case study in tracing the impact of these trends on polemical literature is the work *Asham Talui* by rabbi Yehoshua Segre (1708–1797).⁵⁸ Segre was a member of the Kabbalistic circles in northern Italy and probably studied for some time with Basilea. His work constitutes a direct response to Christian authors, such as Morosini (whom he mentions), and their criticism. Following Bariel, he collected questions on the Evangelion and later theology, directing them at the Christian polemicists. The rather tolerant context that Segre seems to perceive in his immediate surroundings is expressed in the work. Despite his harsh tone, he often reports on actual meetings with Christians, during which heated polemical arguments were exchanged yet his safety was never threatened.⁵⁹

Segre is well aware of the ongoing discussion concerning religious rites and adds a rather novel remark to the approaches already mentioned. In the part of his work dealing with this topic, he first responds to Morosini's scornful comments on how rabbinic tradition regulates the blowing of the ram's horn at Rosh Hashanah (Jewish new year). "Who cares what the exact sound is?" he teases at the end of his account (Morosini 1683, pp. 660–62). As a devoted Kabbalist who wrote extensively on this very commandment, one would expect Segre to adopt one of the aforementioned polemical approaches used by Basilea or Rappa. However, although shortly afterwards he refers the reader to works with Kabbalistic explanations (including those by Basilea), he first takes a different path:

He [Morosini] argues that the rabbis falsely introduced the different Shofar voices and replaced the simple one with others with no justifications for these changes. What difference does it make if the sound is tou tuo or to to to?

We need not answer these questions, as these are not of the fundamentals of faith but rather the rules or instruments of faith. If he would like us to ask about the Christian rules, we would have much to say. We do not have to inform him of our secrets or Talmudic explanations, which he and all other Christians possessed by impure forces cannot understand. (Malkiel 2004, 2005)

Contrary to the other polemical approaches discussed above, Segre doubts the utility of this kind of discourse. He does not wish to explain, as Basilea does, nor does he seek to highlight Christian oddities, the path taken by Rappa. Instead, he notes that religious ceremonies have an apparently arbitrary aspect, which there is no point in debating. He further clarifies this point by including an additional anecdote:

And I should tell the story about one priest that used a stick to ridicule the shaking of our lulav. After he finished, I took the same stick and imitated the maneuvers they do in the Rogazioni [days of fast and prayers for protection said by western Christians]. Then, I told him that every religion has its particular beliefs. As they believe that the carrying of their statue will bless the fields and turn away bad climate, we believe the lulav does the same. And each mocks the other because he does it differently than him. Really, this is all vanity.

It is impossible to determine whether this recounts an actual event or is a clever eighteenth-century retelling of the story told by Capsali (mentioned at the outset of this article). Nevertheless, Segre's work is highly revealing vis-à-vis eighteenth-century Jewish–Christian polemics. While well aware of at least some preceding Jewish reactions to these claims, he wishes to avoid both in-depth explanations and mutual mockery of rites. Instead, he returns to questions concerning the fundamentals of the two faiths, stressing the strength of Jewish traditions while criticizing the church's clear break from them. His work also includes other modes of argument, more similar to the ones used by the other writers discussed herein. However, he demonstrates a somewhat novel attitude to an important aspect of the ongoing debate, one that perhaps reflected the steady rise of more tolerant attitudes to different religious groups in the eighteenth century. It is important to recall that tolerance, especially at this time, had little to do with pluralism. Rather, it meant that enduring the existence of unwanted beliefs and behaviors was sometimes the most acceptable option, given the circumstances in a specific reality (Kaplan 2010).

8. “As the Ancients Have Done”: Rafael Frizzi and the *Scienza Nuova*

The final figure to be examined here is the physician Rafael Ben Zion Frizzi, a graduate of Pavia University and the doctor of the Jewish community in Trieste. Scholars have already discussed his biography and his endeavors to raise awareness among Italian Jews regarding contemporary moral and scientific ideas, particularly in the emerging discipline of public health (Dubin 2012). His many publications indicate that he used his vast knowledge and sharp pen both to defend his Jewish brethren from various accusations and also to criticize them and push them closer to eighteenth-century enlightenment views and social policies (Dubin 1999).

In his early work *Dissertazioni di polizia medica sul Pentateuco* (Frizzi) (six volumes of which were published from 1787 to 1790), Frizzi revealed great interest in the possible connections between Jewish rites and those of other ancient nations. In this work he discusses various aspects of public health, offering, based on biblical verses, Jewish law (especially Joseph Karo's *Shulchan Arukh*), and moral and medical recommendations by ancient and early modern authors. His late magnum opus, *Petach 'Einayim* (named after a place mentioned in the bible; probably a pun that translates to “opening of the eyes”), which included the notes he made during his years of studying Talmudic *'Aggadot*,⁶⁰ follows the same pattern. Indeed, he interprets hundreds of Talmudic stories and short sayings, categorizing them as political, philosophical, or theological, respectively. His main argument is that no questions and doubts are permitted in the realm of theology. However, Talmudic knowledge contains much human wisdom (some applicable only to its time and place and some still relevant) and many passages should be viewed accordingly.⁶¹ Frizzi's proclaimed fideist approach, augmented by some notable quotes from Pierre Bayle, an icon of early modern critical fideist scholarship, made scholars ponder the sincerity of the views he expressed.⁶² He applies this historical awareness not only to the Talmud but also to some biblical verses, seeking to situate them in the religious reality of the ancient world. In these parts of the work, he relies extensively, both directly and indirectly, on the British scholar John Spencer and his *Legibus Hebraeorum*.⁶³ As its name indicates, Spencer's work is mainly occupied with explaining the ancient Jewish religion, and it also reflects on the way its rites should affect the church, while discerning many connections and affinities between the Egyptian and the Greek cults, on the one hand, and Jewish rites, on the other. As in Frizzi's case, scholars disagree regarding Spencer's true intentions in offering such an historical and pagan-related interpretation of biblical law (Levitin 2013). While some read him as a pre-Enlightenment skeptic who detracted from the divine nature of the bible by affiliating it with paganism, others view his work as a new approach within the internal English religious discourse—a polemic intended to make the Christian adoption of Jewish rites less appealing.⁶⁴ On Frizzi's fideism and skepticism I will elaborate elsewhere. Here, I am interested in Frizzi's use of Spencer in presenting the Jewish religion to educated north-Italian Jewish readers, in particular with regard to our case study, the *lulav*.

Spencer dedicates substantial attention to the festival of *Sukkot* and the *lulav*. His general argument situates the biblical commandment in the context of the Egyptian, Roman, and Greek religions, suggesting that they constituted the source for this Jewish rite.⁶⁵

On this, Frizzi remarks:

In Spencer you can read that the ancients, and especially their elders, would take the *lulav* and circle an ark during their holidays, just as our nation does. The meaning of this commandment is to announce that the Lord's providence extends over all objects in this world, both the more and the less valuable . . . it is known that circling around and around in matters of holiness is meant to signify infinity . . . and among ancient nations such as the Greeks and Egyptians and Romans they used to circle their fowl temples at their holidays, as you know. They would circle seven times, because the number seven is important in matters of holiness.⁶⁶

These lines express a radical view. Historically aware Kabbalists, such as Vitali, used the authority of the *midrash* to briefly compare between the *lulav* and the Roman *fascies*, only to explain immediately the futility of the Roman rite and the Jewish spiritual victory over evil forces symbolized by the *lulav*. Frizzi, however, who does not cite the *midrash*, closely compares the religious ceremonies in their entirety—not only the use of palm branches. Furthermore, he presents the rite through the lens of universal ideas such as providence and the philosophical meaning of the number seven, with no trace of Jewish religious superiority. As scholars have noted, notable cultural changes occurred from the mid-eighteenth century onwards among learned circles in Italy.⁶⁷ These included laying the foundations for civil reforms alongside growing interest in a “secularized” worldview and deep interest in religious history, perhaps most commonly identified with Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova*.⁶⁸

Much of the early modern Jewish–Christian discourse invoked the other religion's comparison to ancient religions to support accusations of paganism and impurity. Frizzi was familiar with the religious skepticism and admiration of the classical world common among the dominant voices of the French Enlightenment, which altered common sensibilities in Frizzi's milieu, and he even quoted them. In his time, in order for the Jewish law to gain respect, in his view, it was necessary to explain the aspects it shared with antiquity, not its differences. Frizzi, I argue, while critical of rabbinic tradition, sincerely functioned as an apologist as well as a moderate reformer facing spiritual challenges that he was able to understand fully. He saw Spencer's authority as a powerful source in his attempt to express systematically his novel understanding of Judaism and its connection to other cultures. As the work itself claims, it was intended for enlightened, skeptical Jewish students, presenting them with an image of a religion that contained just about enough classic wisdom to earn their respect and ‘normalize’ the Jewish “oddities” under the weight of a neighboring, novel, neo-classically enlightened gaze. “The rise of neo-paganism”, as Peter Gay described Enlightenment philosophy,⁶⁹ facilitated a new understanding of the ancient rite, as part of a wider attempt to redefine the “sacred” and the “Jewish” in the face of the approaching challenges that were beginning to breach the broken ghetto walls.⁷⁰ As Grafton noted, “In the study of early Christianity as in that of the origins of the world's peoples, comparative methods gained enough in precision and discrimination to yield powerful new histories” (Grafton 2016, p. 42).

Powerful as these histories were, this paper has explored the voices of several Jewish scholars who sought to avoid their influence, subvert it, or reappropriate it. In a European sphere that portrayed Judaism as an unfortunate and perverted religious relic of the past, eighteenth-century Jews sought to construct not only an actual but also a lively *narrative* foundation on which they could build their *Sukkah*, take hold of their *lulav*, and pray for their salvation.

9. Conclusions

To this analysis of a specific moment in the history of Jewish Christian polemics, I would like to add one concluding reflective thought, which will speak to the general theme of this volume. As described in the introduction, the early modern period brought to the realm of religious polemics new forms of historical arguments, which joined the existing medieval polemical library and its exegetical focus. The early modern scholarly inquiry into the times preceding both Moses and Jesus went hand in hand with a new interest in ethnographies rites and symbols, rather than authoritative revealed texts, which were not always existent or available for those who wished to study the dawn of human culture. This novel historical argumentation in some of its appearances drew attention to the possibility that pagan relics were hidden in monotheistic religions. New knowledge of pagan cultures enabled the comparison between them and the other's religion. Thus, it recharged and intensified the possibility to accuse the other's religious tradition not only as being a fatal misreading of the divine Logos as expressed in scripture, but as a constitution of a total and final deviation from it. However, how dramatic was this process's effect on the Jewish side of the Jewish–Christian polemics?

The case of the *lulav* in early modern Italy suggests that the answer is “not very”. As this case study shows, the modern option to transgress generations of Jewish–Christian textual debate by historicizing and ‘paganizing’ the other's religion was indeed the one chosen by some early modern Jewish scholars. The historical perspective inspired such scholars to describe Christianity as masked paganism, lacking any connection whatsoever to the divine Logos. Later on, this option will be prominent in some schools of late-modern Jewish theology, such as religious Zionism. In many works of this religious stream, the traditional exegetical identification of Jewish Christian relations as the struggle between Jacob and Esau that will one day come to its end was sidelined by another exegetical key in which ‘Israel’ and the ‘West’ embody the past clashes between the Israelites with the Canaanites and Amorites.⁷¹ More than just equating the Christian west with the most abhorrent forms of Paganism, in some of its manifestations it claims Christianity is inferior even to pagan religions.⁷²

Yet, alongside Jews like Merari, who chose to ‘paganize’ Christianity, or Jews like Frizzi, who was interested in the affinities between paganism and Judaism, others such as Vale, Rapa, and later Shmuel David Luzzato and Elijah Benamozegh (Kogan 2008), though aware of the historicist option, did not abandon the traditional framework. These scholars held to the view that Christianity, though mistakenly and unsuccessfully, is attempting to reveal the same divine Logos, and remains a different, and generally better religious option than paganism. The same goes for many early- and late-modern halachic rulers, who did not use newly revealed historical anecdotes (such as the connection between the Christian sanctification of Sunday and its alleged relation to pagan sun worshiping) to rule that Christianity is theologically equivalent to paganism (Ha-Cohen 2004). For these Jewish scholars, modern scholarship did not change the core structure of Jewish–Christian debate. The exegetical struggle between Jacob and Esau goes on, “until I come to my lord in Seir” (gen 33:14).

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Notes

¹ Cohen (2013). On the genre of stories about Maimonides, see Avishur (1998).

² On anti-Jewish writing in circles of early modern Venetian humanists see: (Bowd 2016).

³ As a resident of Padua during the first decade of the sixteenth century, it is highly possible that he was familiar with the work of Caelius Rhodiginus, who was not only interested in Jewish rites but was among the first to discuss the affinity between Sukkot and the bacchanalia, see below page 4.

For a genealogy of this literature see: (Hodgen 1998; Grafton 2016, 2019; Davies 2016).

On the early ethnographic descriptions of Jewish rites, mainly in the German-speaking lands, see (Hsia 1994; Burnett 1994; Deutsch 2012). Deutsch's work is the source of the clever term 'Polemical Ethnography' I make use of in this study.

On this literature see (Berger 2019).

See note 5 above.

Cf the short discussion in (Deutsch 2017). Of course, there are illuminating studies concerning other forms of Jewish "talking back", see for example (Shyovitz 2015).

For a volume celebrating his novel application of modern scholarly methods to Jewish sources, see (Bonfil et al. 2004).

For a similar suggestion in more general terms, see (Deutsch 2012, pp. 16–18).

For a survey of the rabbinic exegesis of these verses see: (Sperber 1999; Nagen (Genack)).

On these sources see (Kirkpatrick 2014). On the context that may have supported such a suggestion at the time see (Scott 2015; Dueck 2008).

Matthew 21:9, 15; Mark 11:9–10; John 12:13.

See, for example, (Cohen 1999; Mampieri 2016).

See, for example, *Opuscoli di autori siciliani* 17 (1776). Palermo: Rappeti, pp. 136–142; (Carmeli 1750).

Ibid., p. 204: "in modo che pare piuttosto atto di scherma".

Ibid., p. 205.

On Protestant books in Venice, see (Grendler 1975).

I refer to the first Latin edition: (Buxtorf 1604).

Ibid.

See: *y. Sukkah* 3:4, א"ר אחא זכר ליריחו, אותו היום מקיפין את המזבח שבע פעמים.

The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, England, Ms. Reggio 55 122r. On the politicization of the story of Esther in Jewish history, see Horowitz (2006, pp. 21–25).

(Guetta 2014), see especially (Renieri 1682).

On this passage by Tacitus and Luzzato's reference to it, see (Luzzatto 2019).

Isaac Cardoso, *Las Excelencias de los Hebreos*, Amsterdam 1679, pp. 338–39.

More on this point see, (Yerushalmi 1971).

On this work and its significance, see (Fishman 1997).

This extract from Jacob Frank's *The Words of the Lord* was translated from Polish into Hebrew by Fanya Shalom and edited by Rachel Elior as part of a document published online in 1997. See: <https://pluto.mscc.huji.ac.il/~mselio/haadon-ed-5.pdf> (accessed on 27 April 2021)

Another possible interpretation is that Frank hinted to the 'lulav as a weapon' interpretation, and saw in the playful *lulav* shaking by the children a sign for a future Jewish engagement with military power. On these aspects of Frankism see: (Maciejko 2011, pp. 158–61, 230–45).

It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the sermon, Vitali identifies the *lulav* with the Roman victory parade, but he later adds three more explanations, all relying on Kabbalah, which he seems to find much more satisfying. Yet, Vitali makes it clear that the victory parade is not a religious act, and of course he does not suggest that the *lulav* was imported from the Roman tradition. See *ibid.*, pp. 191–94.

See the manuscript of Bassan's sermons, Bodleian 991, pp. 164–78.

For a full bibliography of his works and academic discussion of him, see (Salah 2007)

For a general description of Basilea's work, see (Guetta 2014, pp. 192–204).

For a different reading of Basilea's work, see (Ruderman 1995)

Sefer 'Emunat chakhamim (Mantua, 1730), 38a–40b.

For a full bibliography of his works and scholarship regarding him, see (Salah 2007, p. 419).

Daniel Lasker identified the author and published an edition of the work. See (Lasker 1996). I refer to the manuscript found in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (NY JTS 2227).

JTS 2227, 48–57, 80a–80b.

Ibid., 80b.

For a full bibliography of his works and scholarship about him, see (Salah 2007, p. 536).

It is interesting to note that he also had personal connections with Vitali.

On early connections between the Jewish text and the Christian holiday, see (Yuval 1996).

Ibid., pp. 9–11.

Ibid., p. 116.

Christians often accused Jews of mimicking the passion displays via ceremonies that involved sheep and goats. This may provide a wider context for this literary choice. See (Zacour 1990).

Ibid., pp. 50–52, 70–82.

Ibid., p. 82.

On the matter see (Garb 2011).

For a study of these different approaches see: (Shoham-Steiner 2010).

Ibid., p. 53.

Ibid. See also *b. Rosh HaShanah*, 17a.

Ibid., pp. 58–61.

Ibid., p. 133.

Valle, commentary on Nehemiah, (Jerusalem: Hamesora, 2010) p. 2.

Valle, *Avodat haQodesh* (Jerusalem: HaMesora, 1993), pp. 257–60 and compare: Valle, *Commentary on Proverbs* (Jerusalem: HaMesora, 2010), pp. 152–54.

It is interesting to note that the word ‘bocolo’ (rather than the more general ‘rosa’) was used by Venetians to describe the roses they used to give out on the 25th of April, the ‘Festa del Bocolo’ and the day of Marco, the saint of Venice. His usage of this christianized term while interpreting a verse from the song of songs, (2:1, “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys”), shows yet again the entanglement of the two communities expressed even during mutual criticism. See: (Muir 1981).

Ibid., p. 593.

This work was published and studied in depth by David Malkiel. See (Malkiel 2004).

Ibid., pp. 93–96.

Its first three volumes were printed in 1815 yet also contain material from his university years. The three remaining volumes were only printed in 1878.

On this work and some of the sources it uses, see (Dubin 1992)

Ibid.

First edition John Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus . . . Editio secunda* (The Hague, 1685). References here are to the Tübingen 1732 edition.

Ibid., pp. 50–58.

Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, 1111–1119.

(Frizzi 1873) (As part of the third volume, this quote was available in print already in 1815).

See, for example, (Ferrone 1995).

For an account of the matter see (Mali 2002).

(Gay 1970). See in particular vol. 1.

For a general account of refiguring Judaism in late modernity, see (Batnitzky 2011). However, the Italian case diverges from her general scheme.

For examples see: (Horowitz 2015); (Tau 2007, *Lemunat Itenu’* vol. 3, pp. 134–38, 200–2).

For an example see: (Johanan 2016). For some criticism on this school see: (Korn 2012).

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