Response to Shaul Bassi, “Dabrar in Haser”

In “Dabrar in Haser,” Shaul Basi discussed both Umberto Fortis’, La parlata degli ebrei Venezia e le parlate giudeo-italiane—the language of Venetian Jews and his own experience with Jewish Venetian. Fortis’s recently reissued study originally came out in 1979, when there were still speakers of the language. Shaul is of the generation that understands much of this language but speaks only a little.

The talk raised the following questions for me:

• Was there a single Judeo-Italian that spread and evolved in different regions, or did each dialect emerge separately? (answer: Fortis believes the latter.)

• Given the resonances with Ladino and Yiddish, once widely spoken synchretic Jewish languages whose imminent loss is mourned, is there a resurgence of interest in rescuing this language, learning it anew? The second edition of Fortis seems to suggest that there is. (answer: Judeo-Venetian was never a full fledged language; the idea of a resurgence is impossible –there are not enough people)

• What happens to a term when the content is derogatory—hebre; iudi, perhaps negro? Does it necessarily lose any chance for a neutral valence? Negro,—from Spanish—has a great range of meanings: awkward, foolish, stupid, unlucky (negra jornata), which may have to do with a certain quality of fabric. Negrigura—foolish thing. Shaul claims that it never has overtly racial content, but I wonder about resonances.

• Was Judeo Venetian ever a written language, used for literary writing? (answer: A little literature, especially drama, has been written written in Judeo Italian languages in the 20th century.)

Comments:
It’s interesting that dishes (i.e., food as prepared, originally, in Jewish kitchens) have taken on their Judeo-Venetian names, which are likely the only names they ever had. Made and remade in the kitchens of women across the generations, these names stay alive as long as the food is desired, cooked, and eaten. As it is so often, culinary tradition (and its language) persists even after much else is lost. Jewish cooking also enters the larger culture. Suca baruca is a pumpkin dish whose name has entered into Venetian dialect.

I was struck by the irony of almost all the expressions Shaul shared with us, and pleased by the symmetry of the fact that irony is a Venetian mode as well as a Jewish one. I liked that Shaul’s father, Dr. Roberto Bassi, referred to Mussolini as the goy godol.

Sayings and words I found particularly intriguing, satisfying, or mysterious, with apologies for any transcription errors:
• Ai hamorim non piacciono i confetti:  
  “Donkeys (i.e., ignorant people) don’t like sugar coated almonds.”

• The law of Moses, some take it by the head and some take it by the feet— refers to the flexibility of the law

• Chi de goi se fida hazir magna: If you trust goyim, you’ll wind up eating pork.  
  Ma chi se fida del giudeo non magna gnanca quello—but if you trust a Jew you won’t get even that.

Adoniai sefatai tiftah—is from the Amidah, but understood in a negative way

Fare sefoh: throw up. (sefoh-to bring forth)

Mispetenecamod—to ruin something

Restar come un Mordecai giasa. Play on words: become a frozen Mordecai, be stunned.

Tananai—cacaphony, from to make a claim

Cabala: lie

In Livornese, thief is a version of gonif.

Orsai comes from Yiddish—yartzeit