



Culture News

THE GHETTO

503 years after the first Jewish enclave was instituted in Venice, what does the word 'ghetto' mean today?

By **Benjamin Ravid**

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The word “ghetto” initially referred to the copper foundry of the Venetian government, *il ghetto* (sometimes spelled *gheto*, *getto*, or *geto*) where cannon balls were cast, from the root *gettare*, to cast or to throw, encountered in English words such as *eject*, *jet*, and *trajectory*. Eventually, an adjacent island was used to dump waste products from the ghetto, and it became known as the *Ghetto Nuovo*, the new foundry, to distinguish it from the area of the foundry that then became known as the *Ghetto Vecchio*, the old foundry. However, in the 14th century, when the foundry was no longer able to meet the needs of the Venetian state, the Venetian government sold the area and it became the site of modest houses mainly inhabited by weavers and other petty artisans. Only in 1516 did the ghetto become the compulsory, segregated and enclosed quarter to which all the Jews in Venice were relegated.

The major impulse for segregating the Jews initially came from the Christian Church. Therefore, in order to understand that development, one must briefly consider the special attitude of Christianity toward Judaism. After the original Judeo-Christians broke with Judaism by rejecting Jewish law and accepting pagans directly into their midst without first converting them to Judaism and thereby establishing Christianity as a separate religion, Christianity adopted a hostile “sibling rivalry” toward those who remained Jews. On a theological level, this was not—as so often assumed—simply because the Jews were considered responsible for the death of Jesus. Rather, it was because Christianity

based itself and its legitimacy upon the “Old Testament” and claimed to be the true Israel, while condemning the Jews who were perceived as erring by stubbornly following the rabbinic interpretations of the Bible rather than the new true Christian exegesis.

The classical Christian attitude toward Judaism was summed up by the so-called Witness Theory of the church father Augustine (354–430), that held that the Jews should not be killed but rather preserved in a position of inferiority in order to testify to their rejection by God. With the expansion of Catholicism throughout Europe, this approach to the Jewish question came to be accepted by the secular authorities who, if they permitted Jews to reside in their realm, subjected them to a widely varying range of prohibitions and restrictions.

Jewish quarters had existed in the Hellenistic pre-Christian Mediterranean world, and as they spread throughout Christian Europe during the Middle Ages, they were designated by various names in diverse languages. Some consisted of the local word for street, quarter, or district together with an adjective indicating that Jews lived there, while others did not reflect a Jewish presence. The simplest explanation for the emergence of these quarters lies in the natural tendency for groups of foreigners or individuals engaged in the same profession to settle together. More specifically, in addition to wishing to live close to relatives and friends, Jews also desired to be near the synagogue and other community institutions, as well as stores selling food prepared according to their religious rites and other items needed for their religious observances.

Most basically, then, one must differentiate between the general term “Jewish quarter” and the term “ghetto,” that originally indicated a very specific kind of Jewish quarter that we will define below as compulsory, segregated and enclosed. Modern scholars have very often employed the two terms indiscriminately. To complicate matters, in the Middle Ages, much remains unclear. In places where it is known that walls and gates existed around the Jewish quarter, it is not always known when they were established, whether all Jews and only Jews were allowed to reside inside the enclosure, and whether the gates were locked for the entire night to segregate the Jewish inhabitants or rather for their security and could be opened when desired.

One can conclude that although compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarters were not completely unknown in Christian Europe before the 16th century, for some had been established in Christian Spain and one of the best-known ones was that established in Frankfurt am Main in 1462, clearly they did not represent the norm, and one should not assume that any Jewish quarter

belonged to that category without conclusive proof. Certainly, the few that did could never have been referred to by contemporaries as ghettos, because the association of the word “ghetto” with a Jewish quarter commenced in Venice in 1516.

During the later Middle Ages, the Venetian government acquiesced in the presence of a few individual Jews in the city of Venice, but except for the brief period from 1382 to 1397, never authorized Jews to settle as a group. However, it allowed Jews to live and to lend money at interest on the Venetian mainland, especially in Mestre, across the lagoon from Venice. When in 1509 the enemies of Venice united, invaded the Venetian mainland, and advanced to the edge of the lagoon in 1509, many of the inhabitants of the mainland, including Jews, fled to find refuge in the city itself.

In 1513, primarily because of the utility of the Jews as moneylenders since the Catholic Church prohibited Christians from lending money to fellow Christians at interest, the government granted a five-year charter to a Jewish moneylender from Mestre, allowing him and his associate to lend money at controlled rates of interest in Venice itself. But many Venetians were bothered by the fact that Jews now resided freely wherever they wished throughout the city. The clergy preached against them, especially at Easter time when, due to the nature of the holiday, anti-Jewish sentiment tended to intensify, and demanded their expulsion. In 1515, around Easter time, the government proposed relegating the Jews to the island of Giudecca (whose name, in this case, has nothing to do with Jews) but no action was taken because of their objections.

In the following year, 1516, again around Easter time, the Venetian Senate enacted, despite strong Jewish objections, a compromise between the new freedom of residence and the previous state of exclusion by requiring all Jews to dwell on the island called the Ghetto Nuovo. The preamble to the legislation of March 29 recollected that in the past, various laws had provided that no Jew could stay in the city for longer than fifteen days a year. However, out of necessity and because of the most pressing circumstances of the times, Jews had been permitted to live in Venice, primarily so that the property of Christians that was in their hands (i.e., the pledges in the pawnshops) would be preserved. Nevertheless, the legislation continued, no God-fearing Venetian wished that Jews should live spread out all over the city in the same houses as Christians, going where they pleased day and night and committing many detestable and abominable acts to the gravest offense of God and against the honor of the well-established Venetian republic.

Therefore, the legislation continued, all Jews then living throughout the city and those who were to come in the future were immediately to go to live together in the Ghetto Nuovo. In order for this to be done without delay, its houses were to be evacuated at once. As an incentive for the owners to comply, the Jews (who since 1423 had been forbidden from purchasing or acquiring real estate in the Venetian state) moving in were to pay a rent one-third higher than that which the Christian tenants had paid, with that additional amount to be exempt from taxation.

Furthermore, to prevent Jews from going around all night, gates were to be erected on the side of the Ghetto Nuovo facing the Ghetto Vecchio and also at the other end. These two gates were to be opened in the morning at sunrise and closed at sunset by four Christian guards who were to live there alone, without their families, and to be paid by the Jews. The two sides of the Ghetto Nuovo

that overlooked the small canals were to be sealed off by high walls, and all direct access from the houses to the canals, which served as the main route of communication and transportation in Venice, was also to be eliminated. Thus, the Jewish quarter known as the ghetto of Venice came into being.

Despite the attempts of the Jews to ward off segregation in the new compulsory area assigned to them, the Venetian government was adamant. The Senate legislation contained three basic provisions:

- The new Jewish quarter was compulsory; every Jew had to live within it.
- It was segregated; no Christians were allowed to live inside it.
- It was enclosed by walls and gates that were locked at night and remained so until the morning.

Although willing to make minor concessions on a few administrative details, such as extending the closing time of the gates by one hour in the summer and two in the winter, allowing Jewish doctors to leave the ghetto after hours to treat Christian patients, and eliminating the nocturnal boat patrol that the Jews were required to finance, the Senate was unwilling to yield on any of these three basic points. While acknowledging that the presence of Jews in Venice was desirable because of *raison d'état* (reason of state), religious concerns relegated them to an appropriately confined space within Christian society.

Yet while the establishment of the ghetto acknowledged the legitimacy of the Jewish presence, it did not ensure the continued residence of the Jews in Venice, for that privilege was based on the five-year charter of 1513. Although the renewal of the charter often hung in the balance especially during the 16th century, nevertheless the Jews continued to reside in Venice on sufferance on the basis of charters that required periodical renewal until the end of the Venetian republic in 1797.

Although a few compulsory, segregated, and enclosed Jewish quarters had existed prior to 1516, primarily in Spain and the Germanic lands, they were never called ghettos before the establishment of the Venetian ghetto in 1516. Thus, the oft-encountered statement that the first ghetto was established in Venice in 1516 is correct in a technical, linguistic sense but somewhat misleading in a wider context. It would be more concise and precise to assert that the compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarter received the name “ghetto” as a result of developments in Venice in 1516. In the felicitous formulation of Robert Bonfil, the city of Venice “retains the copyright for the semantically innovative term ghetto as defining the locus of the settlement of the Jews in the city.”

In 1541, some 25 years after all Jews in Venice had been compelled to live in the ghetto, visiting Levantine Jewish merchants complained to the Venetian government that they did not have sufficient space for themselves and their merchandise within the ghetto. In response, in the context of a larger plan designed to make trading in Venice more attractive to foreign merchants, the government, acknowledging that those Jewish merchants were importing the greater part of the merchandise coming from the Ottoman Balkans, ordered that their complaint be investigated. Six weeks later, following the confirmation of their situation, the merchants were assigned 20 dwellings in the adjacent Ghetto Vecchio that was ordered walled up with two gates, one opening up to the

pavement on the side of the canal of Cannaregio and the other, at the other end, to the wooden footbridge leading to the Ghetto Nuovo.

The word “ghetto” did not remain confined to Venice for long. The Counter-Reformation papacy adopted a more hostile attitude toward the Jews, and in 1555, Pope Paul IV issued a bull that severely restricted the Jews. Its first paragraph provided that henceforth all Jews in all places in the papal states were to live together separated from Christians on a single street with only one entrance and exit and should that street not suffice, then on as many adjacent ones as should be necessary. Accordingly, the Jews of Rome were required to move into a new compulsory, segregated and enclosed quarter in that city and similar Jewish quarters were also established in papal Bologna and Ancona. Eventually, in 1569, all Jews in the Papal States were ordered to move to the compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarters of Rome or Ancona.

Subsequently, other local Italian authorities instituted compulsory, segregated and enclosed quarters for the Jews. Following the Venetian nomenclature, these new residential areas were given the name of ghetto. The major exception to ghettoization on the Italian peninsula was the case of Tuscan Livorno (Leghorn), because of the desire of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany to attract international Jewish merchants to develop their new port at Livorno.

Eventually, the word “ghetto” returned to Venice in its new sense of a compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarter with no connection whatsoever to the copper foundry that had given the Ghetto Vecchio and the Ghetto Nuovo their names. In 1630, the Jewish merchants requested that the ghetto be enlarged to house some wealthy Jewish merchant families who would settle in the city if given suitable living space. In response, the Venetian Senate provided that an area located across a canal from the Ghetto Nuovo be enclosed and joined to it by a footbridge. Since areas called the old ghetto (the Ghetto Vecchio) and the new ghetto (the Ghetto Nuovo) already existed in Venice, it is understandable that this third ghetto almost immediately became known as the newest ghetto (the Ghetto Nuovissimo).

However, the Ghetto Nuovissimo differed from the Ghetto Nuovo and the Ghetto Vecchio in one most important respect. While the two earlier designations had been in use prior to the residence of the Jews in those locations and owed their origin to the previous presence of a foundry in their area, the Ghetto Nuovissimo had no association with a foundry. Rather, it was called the Ghetto Nuovissimo because it was the site of the newest compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarter. The term “ghetto” had thus come full circle in the city of its origin: from its original specific meaning as a foundry in Venice to a new generic usage in other cities to denote a compulsory, segregated, and enclosed Jewish quarter with no relation to a foundry, and finally to that generic usage also in Venice.

It should be noted that the Jews of the Early Modern Italian ghettos shared much of the general outlook and interests of their Christian neighbors, although they retained their own religious identity with all that it entailed, since for them the distinguishing feature of Judaism was not cultural but rather religious. Consequently, their cultural life was closer to the more open patterns that had characterized Spanish Jewry rather than to the more restrictive style characteristic of northern German-Polish Ashkenazi Jewry. The everyday spoken language of the Jews consisted of the local Italian dialect with some added Hebrew words. More educated members of the community could

read Italian and some also Latin, and were well versed in both the classics of Greco-Roman civilization (although generally Greek culture was known through Latin translations) and contemporary Italian literature.

If our understanding of the word is unclear, how clear can our understanding of the Jewish experience be?

While the ghetto involved a varying range of restrictions, ultimately it should always be kept in mind that the word “ghetto” itself only referred to a certain type of housing arrangements for Jews. Since the early modern Italian ghettos enclosed all Jews in the city or town, they really constituted “the city of the Jews,” a self-governing entity supported by the authorities because of its economic utility. Understandably, the individuals living in it varied greatly in wealth, although given the restrictions on the economic activities officially permitted to the Jews, a large number were not well off. Yet it must be recalled that the Rothschilds commenced to accumulate their wealth within the Judengasse of Frankfurt. In short, the ghetto was not automatically synonymous with a broken-down society or with a slum and those who had the means enjoyed a higher standard of living and furnished their apartments more luxuriously than others. Yet undeniably the compulsory, segregated and enclosed ghetto was very important in reinforcing the long-standing view that the Jew constituted an “Other” in Christian society from whom the faithful should stay away as much as possible.

The French Revolution and Napoleon extended the emancipation of the Jews, at least temporarily, to the areas that they conquered and permanently ended ghettos in places that became a part of France, such as Nice, Avignon and Carpentras. As for Frankfurt, in June 1796 the approaching French army, aiming its cannons at the Arsenal, struck the Judengasse (the Jewish street) instead, causing fires in many places with the result that most of it burnt down. Despite immediate proposals to rebuild the Judengasse, it was never restored.

Eventually, in May 1797, as the army of Napoleon Bonaparte stood poised at Mestre across the lagoons from the city of Venice, the Venetian government dissolved itself in favor of a municipal Council influenced by the new French ideals of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*. That Council ended the special restricted status of the Jews of Venice and ordered the ghetto gates torn down. However, the ghetto of Rome was to endure well into the 19th century.

Thus initially, the word “ghetto” was used only in connection with compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarters on the Italian peninsula. Interestingly, it does not appear in Shakespeare’s classic *The Merchant of Venice* (written ca. 1596–1597). It seems to have appeared in print in the English language for the first time in the travelogue of the well-known English traveler Thomas Coryat, whose account, called *Coryat’s Crudities*, was published in London in 1611. When introducing

the ghetto in the course of his account of his visit to Venice in 1608, Coryat felt the need to explain the word as he wrote about “the place where the whole fraternity of the Jews dwelleth together, which is called the Ghetto.”

The question regarding when the word “ghetto” first appeared in the various European languages north of the Alps in the general sense of a compulsory, segregated, and enclosed Jewish quarter, rather than referring to specific Italian ghettos, still requires definitive investigation. It must be stressed that any such investigation has to be undertaken on the basis of the sources in their original language and not based on translations. To give one example, the phrase “*durch die Einzwängung Frankfurter Judengassmauern*” (through the compulsory Frankfurt Jewish-street walls) of Heinrich Heine was translated into English as “... within the walls of the Frankfurt Ghetto,” a rendering that makes any philological investigation on the basis of translation futile.

An examination of book titles reveals that until 1840 the word “ghetto” always referred to a specific Italian location. It appears that the first book with the word “ghetto” in the title that did not refer to Italian ghettos was Berthold Auerbach’s *Das Ghetto* (The Ghetto) published in 1840. However, the book of Leopold Kompert, *Aus dem Ghetto* (Out of the Ghetto) (1848), which opened with a sense of consciously standing “outside the ghetto,” has been characterized by Anne Fuks and Florian Krobb in their book *Ghetto Writing* as “the first collection of stories that carries a programmatic reference to the ghetto in its title. For this reason, Kompert can be regarded as the inaugurator of the ghetto story as a distinct genre within German literary history.”

Subsequent usages of the word “ghetto” reflect the paradoxical development that, as the few remaining compulsory, segregated, and enclosed Jewish quarters of Europe were disappearing during the course of the 19th century, the word “ghetto” gained increasing international currency in a new sense. A new usage of the word “ghetto” developed in an extended meaning no longer confined to compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarters.

As large segments of German Jewry strove to assimilate into the German middle class, they accepted the Enlightenment ideal of *Bildung*, stressing self-improvement on the basis of conceptions of rationality, enlightenment, and culture. *Bildung* became the criterion for judging traditional Jewish culture, and it required the discarding of Jewish habits and ways of life that were considered superstitious, obscurantist and culturally-backward. Such a Jewish society was perceived as still existing to the immediate east of Germany, in Eastern Europe. Consequently, the term “ghetto” began to be employed to refer not only to Jewish quarters of a compulsory, segregated and enclosed nature, but also to any Jewish settlement of a dense nature such as those in Eastern Europe and, by extension, as an adjective to refer to the way of life generated there.

Actually, the word “ghetto” in its original Italian pre-emancipation sense cannot be used in connection with Jewish life in Poland and Lithuania, and later Czarist Russia, which acquired a large number of Jews through the partitions of Poland. There, although Jews lived in small towns and rural villages that were often predominantly Jewish and referred to as shtetles or shtetlach, they were not confined to compulsory, segregated and enclosed quarters separated from their Christian neighbors. One looks in vain for a ghetto in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

From a wider perspective, despite the general 19th-century Russian restriction that officially no Jew could live outside the Pale of Settlement (basically, the Polish territory annexed by Russia), the Pale never possessed the one essential characteristic of the ghetto because within it the Jews were not segregated from their Christian neighbors. Furthermore, the requirement that all Jews were to live within the Pale was not always enforced, for at certain times, specific groups of Jews such as agriculturalists, holders of university degrees, merchants of the first guild, artisans, and army veterans were granted official permission to live outside the Pale.

Nevertheless, “ghetto” increasingly came to be used by many acculturated Jews as an adjective to characterize the now unacceptable way of life, mentality and culture created by the dense Jewish settlements in Eastern Europe. Expressions such as “ghetto life” and “ghetto mentality” were intended to refer to the Eastern European pattern of Jewish life, and certain of its characteristic manifestations, usually in a negative sense, and had little to do with the institution of the ghetto of the Italian peninsula. As German Jewry increasingly felt that it had overcome its own “ghetto past” and successfully entered modernity, the term “ghetto Jew” came to refer to the Eastern European Jew, the Ostjude who, as Steven Aschheim observed in his *Brothers and Strangers*, “became synonymous with *Umbildung* and was perceived as being beyond the bounds of civilization, indeed half-Asiatic, as in the title *Aus Halb-Asien* (Out of Half-Asia) of the novel of Karl Emil Franzos.

The central theme in the popular genre of “ghetto literature” that emerged in Central Europe toward the middle of the 19th century widely disseminated the stereotype of the ghetto throughout the German-speaking world and also outside it, through translations into other languages. On the whole, the portrayal was generally negative, written from the point of view of a detached outside observer or former inhabitant who had managed to find the way “out of the ghetto.” Nevertheless, there were also some who viewed the “ghetto” in a more positive light, especially as the “cult of the Ostjuden” emerged. As Aschheim noted, “The shtetl—affectionate synonym for the negatively-loaded term ghetto—functioned as a recognizable historical entity, nostalgic antithesis to the disenchantment of European life. It symbolized total and warm human community, *Gemeinschaft*, a counter-utopia to values lost in the world of impersonal *Gesellschaft*.”

The attitude of the then newly-emerging Zionism toward Ostjuden and the ghetto was complex and ambivalent. By affirming Jewish nationalism in its anti-bourgeois rebellion, the second-generation German Zionists challenged a basic belief of liberal assimilationist German Jewry by seeing in the Ostjuden the maintenance of an authentic Judaism that required modernization. Yet, ultimately, the movement in favor of a new Jewish beginning in the national homeland perceived Jewish residence outside that homeland as undesirable and abnormal, and held up the “ghetto” in contrast to its new ideal. With the Zionist disparagement of Jewish residence outside the national homeland and the dismissive ideology of “the negation of the Diaspora,” the word “ghetto” became a central element of the negative galut (Diaspora, literally Exile) existence that had to be transcended in the new rebuilt Land of Israel. As the New Year 1912 editorial of the Berlin *Jüdische Rundschau* asserted, “the whole Gulus is the ghetto.”

The word “ghetto” also came to be widely used in a completely different sense from its original pre-emancipation usage as a result of at least two major factors. The first was the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe and their initial settlement in poorer urban neighborhoods in the West that were certainly not compulsory, segregated or enclosed, as for example in Berlin, Paris, London, New

York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston. The second was the increasing usage of the word “ghetto” in English fiction that portrayed Jewish life in an English-speaking environment.

Israel Zangwill did much to popularize the new, loose usage of the word “ghetto” in the general sense of a Jewish neighborhood rather than specifically as a compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarter through his popular novels and vignettes of immigrant Jewish life in London that were widely read on both sides of the Atlantic. He used the word in the title of four of his widely read volumes: *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), *Ghetto Tragedies* (1893), *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898), and *Ghetto Comedies* (1907). Interestingly, the earliest example of the English usage of the word “ghetto” as not referring to an Italian ghetto cited in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is taken from Zangwill’s *Children of the Ghetto*.

Abraham Cahan, an admirer of Zangwill, wrote a novel of his own, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), and later again portrayed Jewish immigrant life in New York in his epic *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). Between the appearance of the two works of Cahan, the “ghetto” was given further extensive exposure by the pioneering essays of Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York*, first published together as a book in 1902.

While initially associated with the settlement of Eastern European Jews primarily in Western European and North American urban centers in the later 19th century, the term “ghetto” gained wider currency as it came to be applied to an increasing number of situations outside the Jewish world. Jack London, in his *The People of the Abyss* (1903), observed that “At one time the nations of Europe confined the undesirable Jews in city ghettos. But today the dominant economic class, by less arbitrary but none the less rigorous methods, has confined the undesirable yet necessary workers into ghettos of remarkable meanness and vastness. East London is such a ghetto, where the rich and powerful do not dwell, and the traveler cometh not. And where two million workers swarm, procreate and die.” The *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “ghetto,” cites examples of the usage of the word in this new sense, no longer associated with the Jews but rather referring to areas densely inhabited by other groups, as in the expressions the “working class ghetto” (1908) and “the London ghettos” (1909).

Yet probably no book did more to spread the usage of the word and of the concept of the ghetto in its extended meaning among social scientists and the educated public at large, especially in the United States, than did the classic study of 1928, *The Ghetto*, by the sociologist Louis Wirth. Significantly, Robert E. Park, Wirth’s mentor and prominent member of the “Chicago School” of sociology, in his foreword to the book of Wirth made the important observation that “‘Ghetto’ as it is here conceived, is no longer a term that is limited in its application to the Jewish people. It has come into use in recent times as a common noun—a term which applies to any segregated racial or cultural group.”

Unquestionably, the word and concept of “ghetto” were given further prominence as a result of the Jewish quarters established by Nazi Germany during World War II. Yet it must always be remembered that the 20th-century Nazi ghettos differed fundamentally from those of earlier pre-emancipation ghettos in at least one crucial respect. Those earlier ghettos were intended to provide Jews with a clearly defined permanent space in Christian society in accordance with traditional Christian theology. The Nazi ghettos, after it was decided to embark on the final solution to the Jewish problem by their total elimination, eventually came to constitute merely temporary way-

stations on the road to its implementation. Thus, the two different kinds of ghettos highlight the difference between traditional religious anti-Judaism and modern racial anti-Semitism in its ultimate form. In the case of religious anti-Judaism, a Jew could escape from the ghetto by converting, while in the case of modern racial anti-Semitism, there was no way out. Indeed, the statement (or actually misstatement) that the Holocaust represented a return to the Middle Ages is probably the biggest myth associated with the word “ghetto.”

Mitchell Duneier in his book *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, The History of an Idea* has **pointed out that** the awareness of the Nazi ghettos led to an increase in the usage of the word “ghetto” to apply to Afro-American residential quarters before “finally overtaking the ‘Jewish/Warsaw ghetto’ usage in 1965.” The word “ghetto” also came to be used as an adjective, and continues to be so used down to the present, as very loud cassette-tape recorders known as “boom-boxes” are also referred to as “ghetto blasters,” and very often the music that they play as “ghetto music.” The word “ghetto” of course here refers to contemporary “ghettos” and not to those in any aspect of the past Jewish experience.

To summarize and conclude, the gradually extended simultaneous usages of the word “ghetto” have caused significant blurring of the very important distinctions between voluntary quarters and compulsory, segregated and enclosed quarters and obscured inherently different attitudes toward Jews and other minorities on the part of the governments under which they lived.

Therefore, when one hears or reads the word “ghetto,” one must ask: to which ghetto is the speaker or author intending to refer, and does the word evoke the intended image? If the compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarters of Venice, Rome, and Florence were ghettos; if the Lower East Side of New York and Whitechapel of London were ghettos; if Warsaw, Łódź, and Bialystock were ghettos; if Westchester and Newton are “golden ghettos”—then what exactly does the word “ghetto” mean? If our understanding of the word is unclear, how clear can our understanding of the Jewish experience be? And when we speak of non-Jewish ghettos in the cities of North America, South Africa, and elsewhere in the world, to what are we referring? Are they compulsory areas established by the state, or rather by zoning laws or by red-lining? Are they enclosed and gated? Is there a curfew? Perhaps we mean a voluntary area characterized by the residence of a certain ethnic group? Or ... ? What image will arise in our minds, and does it correspond to the specific reality being referred to?

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Benjamin Ravid is a Professor Emeritus at Brandeis University. He is currently concluding his history of the Jews of the Venetian Republic.



COMMENT PRINT EMAIL

MORE IN: ANTI-SEMITISM EUROPE GHETTO ISRAEL ZANGWILL JEWISH GHETTO

PALE OF SETTLEMENT VENICE VENICE GHETTO



| (Photo: Alex Wong/Getty Images)

Earlier this month, after Rep. Ilhan Omar accused American Jews of dual loyalty and the Israel lobby of purchasing undue influence, the House passed a **resolution** that did not mention Omar by name and that condemned not only anti-Semitism but every other conceivable form of bigotry. Doing his best to hide his disappointment, Rep. Eliot Engel, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee, **said**, “I wish we had had a separate resolution about anti-Semitism. I think we deserved it.”

The congressman can take heart: A new resolution, drafted by Ted Cruz and slated to be introduced in the Senate this week, delivers everything that the Democrats’ muddled manifesto did not. “Anti-Semitism,” it declares in its very first sentence, “is a unique form of prejudice.” It’s precisely the sort of statement—factually true and morally clear—that so many American Jews hoped to hear after Omar made her inflammatory comments, and had the new resolution said nothing more it still would’ve been enough. But in four brief paragraphs, Cruz’s initiative delivers not only a much-needed course correction but also an education on the specific historical evils of anti-Semitism and an elucidation of the real key differences between both political parties when it comes to understanding and honoring the concerns of American Jews. For these reasons, it merits a close reading.

The resolution begins, as all serious documents must, by providing historical context. Anti-Semitism, it reminds us, is not, as the Democrats’ resolution argued, narrowly an obsession of white supremacists—and as such only one small part of a worldview that disdains “African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other people of color, Jews,

Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and others.” Anti-Semitism is instead an unparalleled conspiracy theory that dates back more than 2,000 years and that, when left unchecked, has paved direct paths to extermination.

And while genocide has always been and remains anti-Semitism’s ultimate goal—which is why the Holocaust-denying Iranian regime, for example, invests so many resources in financing and facilitating the murder of Jews everywhere, from Jerusalem to Buenos Aires—the ancient hatred couldn’t have survived without effective means of reproducing itself and presenting itself in every generation anew as something rational and respectable people might endorse. This, the Cruz resolution reminds us in its second and third paragraphs, is why “anti-Semitism has for hundreds of years included attacks on the loyalty of Jews, including the fabrication and circulation of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion by the secret police of Russia,” and why it has always included attacks on the livelihood of Jews, from prohibitions of land ownership in the Middle Ages to the Nazi confiscation of Jewish property to the present-day BDS campaign designed to deny Jews the ability to sustain themselves.

If all these injustices seem like the stuff of a distant and benighted past, the resolution courageously concludes by reminding us of America’s own less-than-perfect treatment of its Jewish citizens. “As recently as 50 years ago,” reads its fourth and final paragraph, “it was common for Jews to suffer from systematic discrimination,” which included everything from being denied admission to elite educational institutions to being kept out of law firms, medical practices, and other professional associations. And while many barriers have indeed been removed, the resolution acknowledges that Jews “continue to face false accusations and stereotypes of dual loyalty” and remain “the targets of the majority of hate crimes committed against any religious group.”

It’s that last paragraph that gives the resolution its beating heart. It shows an understanding, rare for the generally vapid genre of official declarations read from the Senate floor, of the actual lived experience of actual American Jews. It acknowledges that anti-Semitism isn’t some opaque and abstract construct best understood by theorizing about hegemony, intersectionality, or other concepts beloved by the grievance-peddlers in college classrooms, but an all too real prejudice that continues to afflict real Jews in unique and nonreplicable ways.

This is not only an ontological distinction, but a political one as well. If you view the world exclusively through the lens of big, broad categories—race, sexual orientation, religious belief—you are likely to prefer the sort of legislation that sees people as not much more than extras in an epic drama of clashing identities. That’s why reparations, for example, long opposed by the majority of Americans—including **about half of all African-Americans**—and considered a nonstarter by nearly all mainstream politicians, has become a cause célèbre for several of the Democrats running for president in 2020. Benefiting not those who had suffered but their distant descendants, the policy proposal is the perfect embodiment of how progressives think about politics: A contest between warring groups that can be decided only by sweeping and symbolic gestures.

Cruz’s resolution, on the other hand, shows a dramatically different way of thinking. Rather than treating Jews as a metaphor—an amorphous group whose suffering can be distilled into some politically valuable and intoxicating elixir—it is careful to enumerate the ways in which individuals have suffered. It’s a useful vantage point from which to approach legislation, as previous efforts by

the senator had shown. Last year, for example, he spearheaded an **amendment** that called on the Defense and State Departments to issue a report on the use of human shields by terrorist groups murdering Israelis, a highly specific and concrete step to alleviate the particular suffering of real-life Jews. We should expect and accept no other approach.

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*Liel Leibovitz is a senior writer for Tablet Magazine and a host of the **Unorthodox** podcast.*



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