

Leon Modena (1571-1648) and Rachel (c. 1570-1648)

Engaged to Esther, but she died before the wedding took place (1590).
Married to Rachel (1590).



Leon Modena

From the title page of the 1638 Venice edition of *Historia de Riti Hebraici*

Leon Modena was a Venetian Rabbi, poet, writer, and polymath.

“Modena was a precocious student. At the age of two and a half, he recited the Haftarah in synagogue; by three, he was able to translate the weekly Torah portion from Hebrew into Italian; by nine, he was delivering whole sermons . . .

In parallel with Torah study, Modena excelled in secular pursuits. He received musical instruction in singing and dancing, studied Latin, and was a favorite student of Rabbi Samuel Archivolti in Padua, from whom he learned the arts of poetry and letter writing as well as Torah . . .

In Venice and on occasional teaching stints elsewhere, the polymathic Modena embarked on a dizzying range of pursuits in order to make a living. His autobiography lists no fewer than twenty-six sources of earning. These included teaching both Jews and gentiles . . . ; composing liminary verses and occasional poems for weddings and funerals, as well as more commercial writing ventures such as translating, and writing and directing comedies; delivering his own sermons and composing them for others; supplying ‘arcane remedies and amulets’; printing, editing, and proofreading; cantorial work, which included directing the synagogue choir; and eventually, once he was ordained near the requisite age of 40, employment as cantor for the Italian synagogue, having long worked as a legal clerk for the Venice rabbinate” (from *Leon Modena’s “Kinah Shemor”* by Micha Lazarus, *SKENÈ Texts and Studies* II.6, 2023.)

Modena authored a number of important books, including *Ari Nohem*, an attack on Kabbalah; *Tzori la-nefesh u-marpeh la-etsem*, a guide for laypeople caring for the sick and dying, and *History de gli riti Hebraici*, a guide to Judaism written for Christian readers. Most important for our purposes, he wrote his own autobiography *Hayye Yehuda* (Yehuda was his Hebrew name), one of the few autobiographies written by Jews in the early modern period. The passage below, describing his marriage arrangements, is taken from the translation *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi*, trans. and ed. Mark Cohen, Princeton U. Press, 1988

After this, my mother spoke to me each day, saying, “If you would heed my command and comfort me in my troubles, you would take as your wife my niece, namely Esther — the daughter of my mother’s sister Gioja, the wife of Isaac Simhah, may God his Rock protect him and grant him long life — for she seems fitting to me. I will thereby create a marital tie within my family and peace will reign in our house.” And so she requested of my revered father of blessed memory in every conversation. She wrote to her sister about it and she gave her answer. And so the matter stood.

Anyhow, I had engaged in dream divination, using prayer without conjuration, in order to see the woman intended as my mate. In my dream, an old man held my hand and led me to a certain wall upon which was drawn a portrait covered with a curtain. When he drew aside the veil, I saw a portrait of my cousin Esther, as well as the color of her garment. While I was still gazing at the image, it changed, and another one, which I could not clearly make out, replaced it. In the morning I reported the dream to my revered father of blessed memory and to my mother, but they did not believe it.

Then, in the month of Elul 5349 [August-September, 1589] my mother of blessed memory and I arrived in Venice on our way to Ancona to retrieve property and goods that had been in the hands of my [half-]brother of blessed memory, because his wife had seized them and we had not seen even a shoelace of it. Afterward we changed our mind about going on and lingered in Venice; and while there, my mother and her sister and the relatives again discussed the match. We completed the marriage agreement, shook hands, and made the symbolic acquisition with great rejoicing. I pointed out to my mother that she [Esther] was wearing clothes of the same color and ornamentation that I had described more than a year previously when I had seen her in my dream. She was truly a beautiful woman, and wise, too. I said that “finds” and not “found” applied to me.¹

When the wedding date, which was the 13th of Sivan 5350 [June 15, 1590], approached, I wrote to my revered father, who was then in Bologna, so that he

¹That is to say, the biblical verse “He who finds a wife finds goodness” (Proverbs 18:22) and not the verse “A woman more bitter than death I have found” (Ecclesiastes 7:25). The allusion is based on Berakhot 8a. [footnote in Cohen, 1988]

would come. I also invited my friends and relatives, and we all traveled to Venice immediately after Shavuot, rejoicing and lighthearted. When we arrived there, we found the bride confined to her bed, and everyone said that nothing was wrong except for a little diarrhea and that she would soon recover. Her illness grew worse from day to day, however, until she lay near death. Yet her heart was like that of a lion, and she was not afraid.

On the day she died, she summoned me and embraced and kissed me. She said, “I know that this is bold behavior, but God knows that during the one year of our engagement we did not touch each other even with our little fingers. Now, at the time of death, the rights of the dying are mine. I was not allowed to become your wife, but what can I do, for thus it is decreed in heaven. May God’s will be done.”

Then she requested that a sage be summoned so that she could make confession. When he arrived she recited the confessional prayer and asked for the blessing of her parents and my mother. On the night of the Holy Sabbath, the 21st of Sivan 5350 [June 22, 1590]—almost on the night that my [half-]brother of blessed memory had died—at the hour of the entry of the Sabbath bride, my own bride departed from this life of vanity for eternal life and passed away. The weeping on the part of all who knew her, both within and outside her family, was great. May she rest in peace.

Immediately after her burial, all the relatives set upon me and my mother, saying, “Behold, her younger sister is as good as she. Why forfeit the opportunity to perpetuate the kinship and to give comfort to the mother and father of the young woman?” They entreated me to the point of embarrassment to take her sister Rachel to wife. I wrote to my revered father, who answered me as he had always done in this matter, and these were his words: “Do as you like, for the choice is yours. Today or tomorrow I will be taken from you, and you and your children will be left with her. For this reason, understand well what lies before you, and act to the best of the ability granted you by God.”

In order to please my mother, as well as the dead girl, who had hinted at it in her words, I agreed to marry the aforementioned Rachel. Immediately we wrote up the agreement and were married on Friday the 5th of Tammuz 5350 [July 6, 1590], under a favorable star.