

ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE *PARNAŠIM* IN THE
VENETIAN *ŠOMERIM LA-BOQER* FRATERNITY AND ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT¹

The *Hevrat Šomerim la-Boqer* is one of the communal organizations of the Jewish community of Venice that functioned at the end of the 16th - beginning of the 17th century. On the basis of the two fraternity chapters accessed in a manuscript form, I am going to reflect on the role of the head administrators (*parnašim*) in the framework of the fraternity.

The dual nature of the power in the Jewish communities and shifts it witnessed during the early modern period have been addressed by a number of scholars. The erosion of the rabbinic authority in early modern Italian Jewish communities has been closely examined by Robert Bonfil (see e. g. Bonfil 1989). David Malkiel remarks that – the combined rule of rabbis and *parnasim*, lay leaders, was a recognized principle ... in Venetian practice – (Malkiel 1991). Bernard Dov Cooperman in his article on the Jewish community of Rome points out that – Jewish leaders borrowed organizational models from their environment ... they sought to legitimize these “alien” models in terms drawn from Jewish tradition – (Cooperman 2006). The early modern period also saw – a decline of rabbinic authority and the rising power of lay oligarchies – in the Italian Jewish communities (Ruderman 2016). These changes had affected the role and status of the Venetian *Hevrat Šomerim la-Boqer parnašim*, too.

To address these changes, I will examine the two chapters adopted by the fraternity and see what sort of themes are reflected in regulations. I am going to access the specific obligations of the head administrators (*parnašim*) in

the everyday life of the association. I shall show that although the chapter stated that the gathering of all members of the fraternity should be in charge of all the regulations, punishments and fees, in fact, the head administrators decided the matters of the fraternity. Instead of two centers of power, one of them being the fraternity gathering, another – the board of *parnašim*, at the early stage of the fraternity development we actually see only the *parnašim*. Only at the beginning of the 17th century, when the second fraternity chapter was written down, the role of the association gathering, as well as functions of treasurer and judge, seem to balance the power attributed to the head administrators.

The fraternity and its minute book manuscript

The Günzburg collection, kept in the Manuscript Department of Russian State Library, contains a number of valuable documents and incunabula in various Jewish languages covering the period from approximately early Middle Ages to the modern epoch. *Pinqas* (minute book) of one of the early modern Jewish Venetian fraternities from this collection contains the data on some 75 years of this association’s history. The fraternity was active from the 1570s to roughly 1645 and drew some of its members from prominent Italian Jewish families (for example, Luzzatto, a family that produced Jewish scholars and poets, such as Simone Luzzatto, 1583-1663). The document belongs to the category of regulation minute books (*pinqas*) and contains four chapters (the first

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chapter is dated 1607, and the second – 1610; two later chapters remain to be studied). The nature of the manuscript at hand suggests that it combines data from several earlier documents that are now unavailable. Each of the chapters is accompanied by dated notes on the stated validity period of the chapter. If read with special attention to the issues of social networking, the document offers a new perspective on the nature of its creator fraternity as well as on the nature of Jewish fraternities in Italy in general.

The fraternity was preoccupied with the proper execution of a Kabbalistic ritual of *Ashmoret ha-Boqer* (literally, “*Watching of the morning*”). Elliot Horowitz in his research on the *Hevrat Šomerim la-Boqer* of Verona interpreted this fraternity – by name ... devoted to prayer, yet, in practice, to study – (Horowitz 1982). However, the obligations of the head administrators according to the chapters were mostly concerned with the managerial tasks.

The ritual of *Watching of the morning* was closely connected to the rise of the Lurianic Kabbala in Safed, Ottoman empire. It came to Italy thank to a vast activity of the Mantua Chief Rabbi Moshe Zacuto, who in the 17th century spread this new Kabbala in Europe, brought by tradesmen and travellers from the Levant and became quite popular. By the late 1620s – no less than seven separate editions of liturgies for predawn prayer had been published – in Italy, and associations for the recitation of these prayers emerged in many major Italian communities (Horowitz 1989). Occasionally, even more than one such fraternity operated in a given city.

The early history of Kabbalah has been examined by Gershom Scholem (Scholem 1991) whose research to a certain extent was continued by Robert Bonfil who saw the Kabbalah as an agent of modernity that introduced the division into the sacred and profane into Jewish society (Bonfil 1988). Some scholars argue that for a certain percentage of both Christians and Jews in the early modern period – history consequently followed a similar path, from religious ideology based on apocalyptic expectations... to

one of tolerance and increasing secularization – (Coudert 2001).²

Despite the fact that the fraternity was cross-congregational, the chapter offers nothing to suggest that its members were expecting any conflict to arise in relation to the interpretation of the ritual, although each of Jewish congregations in Venice and elsewhere had its own liturgical specifics (*nusah*). Instead, the association was striving to get more people from various backgrounds involved with no apparent fear of creating the conditions for a constant conflict on the ritual grounds inside the fraternity.

Lurianic Kabbala was the first Kabbala to be taught to and directed at a wide Jewish audience of the Mediterranean (Fine 2003). While Kabbala in the 13th to the 15th centuries was transmitted into families and from teacher to a student having little public appeal, in the 16th century it was openly stated that every Jew had a chance to draw nearer the coming of the Messiah. This approach encouraged the formation of voluntary fraternities first in Safed and later in Italian and Ottoman Jewish communities. These fraternities concentrated their activities on a number of rites (the most well-known of them is *Tiqqun ḥašot*, which includes *Tiqqun Raḥel* and *Tiqqun Le’ah*) (Horowitz 1989) that were supposed to fasten the redemption of the Jewish people.

The fraternity was created to ensure the presence of the *quorum* of 10 men who have reached the age of religious adulthood (13 years) that was essential to perform the *Watching the morning* ritual. As Lurianic rituals usually were time-specific and happened late at night or early in the morning, their participants needed a *quorum* in a specific time when synagogues were usually unattended.

Chapter regulations as noted at the minute book manuscript

The document under consideration consists of four chapters (with some later and ear-

² A debate on the nature of social change in relationship between Christians and Jews that occurred with the spread of the ghetto is going on in the scholarship with some researchers noting that the estab-

lishment of ghetto could be one of the engines behind the formation of confraternities including those connected with the Kabbalistic rites (Kaplan 2007).

³ I argued that elsewhere (e.g. a lecture “System

lier additions that remain to be studied) that were in use subsequently in different periods of fraternity activities. Chapters are made of regulations (*sefer*) that serve as a framework for a specific sphere of the fraternity's functioning. Each of the chapters includes from 10 to 30 regulations, the core of which deal with major

procedures and responsibilities of the officials. The next chart shows the themes of the first ten regulations of the two chapters of the fraternity. These regulations seem to show case the major concerns of the association and are present in all chapters that have been explored by the author by now.

First chapter	Second chapter
regulation on [fraternity's] gathering	regulation on the elections of the officials
regulation on the duties of the fraternity's members	regulation on [fraternity's] gathering
regulation on the duties of the <i>parnasim</i> (head administrators)	regulation on the duties of the <i>parnasim</i> (head administrators)
regulation on the duties of the treasurer	regulation on the duties of the treasurer
regulation on the duties of the cantor	regulation on the officials gathering
regulation on the duties of the scribe	regulation on the entrance and exit [from the fraternity] procedure
regulation on the duties of the <i>šammaš</i>	regulation on the duties of the fraternity's members
regulation on the duties of the <i>ne'man</i> (person in charge of valuable objects belonging to the fraternity)	regulation on the duties of the cantor
regulation on the elections of the officials	regulation on the duties of the official responsible for the treasury
regulation on the officials gathering	regulation on the <i>cassetta</i> chest and balls (<i>ballotte</i>) [needed for elections] from fraternity

Chart 1. Regulations topics in the first two chapters of the *Hevrat Šomerim la-Boqer* fraternity.

As the chart makes clear, the authors of the chapters showed little concern in how the rite of “watching the morning” should have been performed. They concentrated first on the issues of proper management of the fraternity, e.g. on defining the functions of different categories of administrators, setting up the procedure for the fraternity's gathering, regulating the relationships between officials and providing the outline of an ordinary member's responsibilities. The ritual matters seem to be obvious for all parties involved with no need for additional clarification.

The only regulation concerning the rite titled “The regulation on the absence from *Watching the morning* [rite]” appears right at the end of the first chapter and ceases to exist as a separate regulation in the second one. Moreover, the regulation bluntly states that “many members of our fraternity are too lazy to wake up to *watch the morning*, so we cannot carry out the rite

reading *Tiqqunim* (a special type of prayer), [as] ten people are required for that”. In order to handle this problem, the authors of the chapter suggested dividing all members of the fraternity into six groups each of which was required to attend the synagogue and perform the ritual on a single day of the week. This attendance was enforced with the fine of two silver coins (*soldi*). In a later chapter, the attempts to persuade or force the members of the association to participate in the ritual continued.

The administrative system of the fraternity

Fraternity administrative system on the regular basis included two or three head administrators (*parnasim*), treasurer (*gabai*), messenger (*šammaš*), cantor (*hazzan*) and scribe (*sofer*). The position of *ne'man* (person in charge

of valuable objects belonging to the fraternity) briefly appears in the first chapter but does not get mentioned in the second one. The regulations attempted to provide thorough instructions on the responsibilities of each official, the duration of their duties, and their responsibilities towards the other officials.

There were three head administrators at the fraternity according to its first chapter or two head administrators and judge (*dayan*) according to the second. They formed the board (in the second chapter the treasurer also became its part) that was considered to be a major administrative body of the association.

All head administrators were elected simultaneously for a period of three months according to the first chapters or six months according to the second chapter. In the second chapter appears a notion of a service period that could not exceed a period of a year for the major officials (head administrators, judge, and treasurer) and an obligation for them to gather at least once in a month to discuss the matters of the fraternity.

The major administrative functions of *parnasim* included the convocation of the fraternity assembly, introducing the issues for the common elections, and the management of the activities of other officials (*šammaš*, cantor, treasurer, scribe, and *ne'man* at least when this position still existed). Among their more specific functions, the minute book mentions the management of the recruitment procedure for the candidates willing to serve as officials. The information on the open vacancies was freely circulating and every Jew could turn to *parnasim* and, after writing down his name at the list, become a candidate. The minute book explicitly states that Jews from all congregations could serve as fraternity officials. *Parnasim* were obliged to hold a special gathering to discuss this matter and have the members of the fraternity to approve one of the candidates.

Head administrators were responsible for the everyday functioning of the fraternity. The minute book mainly concentrates on those routines that required financial expenditures. In such cases, the *parnasim* had to make the scribe to issue a specific document (*mandati*) that allowed to take money from the fraternity's funds. To maintain the daily tasks of the fraternity, *parnasim* could also give orders to all other officials.

Head administrators managed the “entrance and exit” procedures in the fraternity. Those willing to become a member of the association or leave it should have first expressed such a wish publicly at the head administrator's presence. The next step was to pay the entrance or exit fee to the head administrator and small fees to scribe and messenger to prepare a ballot for him. If a majority of the association members votes in his favour, he is considered to be a member of the fraternity. After approval, a successful candidate should have signed the chapter and publicly proclaimed consent with its rules. In case of leaving the fraternity, if a member refused to pay an exit fee and leave immediately, his actions were considered to be a “sin of his tongue” (חטא בלשונו) and he had to pay four ducats as a fee. These processes required thorough management and supervision by the head administrators.

Fraternity gatherings and elections were considered valid only if attended by at least two of *parnasim*. Every detail of these events had to be closely supervised by head administrators. They were obliged to keep the quorum at the gathering so that more than two-thirds of the fraternity members were present. If they were unable to do that, they lost their position as head administrators, paid a fee, and the gathering or election, as well as decisions made during them, were considered invalid.

The head administrators could not participate in the elections. They also had to prevent members of the legally incapable groups (פסולים) from participating. Among those groups, there were persons who have not reached a particular age, non-members or violators of regulations who were prohibited from participating in a certain election or elections at all. *Parnasim* had to supervise all peculiarities of the election process from making sure that none of the members is putting two balls instead of one into the election box (*bussolo*) to counting the number of white and black balls. The second fraternity chapter that was composed at the beginning of the 17th century adds important detail to this process. In cases when the matter discussed at the gathering is considered to be an important fraternity issue, head administrators are prescribed to inform the association members in a week on this matter to give them enough time to prepare for the discussion and make a thoughtful decision.

All financial dealings of the fraternity were also considered to be head administrators'

responsibility. They were in charge of the collection of monthly payments, duties, and fees of those who violated the charter of the fraternity as well as of paying salaries to the officials. If they failed to collect the necessary amount of money, they had to contribute the missing sum from their personal funds. Along with the *parnašim*, there were also several other officials (for example, *ne'man* who was in charge of keeping the special torches used during public processions) who were financially responsible for either object like *ne'manin* the example above or for the correct conduct of procedures.

Head administrators could use fraternity funds up to the sum of three ducats at their discretion. In the cases of a larger sum, they should have asked the approval of the quorum of the fraternity members. If they entitled somebody to spend money on their behalf they had to issue and sign a special document registered twice, at both treasurer's and scribe's minute books. Head administrators were responsible for the safekeeping of the fraternity's funds. The chest where the money was kept had two keys, one at the treasurer's disposal and the second one at *parnašim*'s. They supervised all sorts of donations made in favour of the fraternity that included control over the transportation of the donation boxes from one ghetto synagogue to another and registering of the donated sums at a special treasurer's minute book.

At the end of their office, the *parnašim* were required to make public all decisions, expenses and incomes that occurred over this period and pass the financial registers to the newly elected head administrators. All regulations of this type pertain to the financial and organizational matters of the fraternity.

Head administrators were also considered to be judges for the fraternity members. The regulations are not precise in defining what sort of cases constituted their jurisdiction. The matters concerned with the affairs of the association, such as the non-payment of fees or violation of the procedure, were certainly investigated by the fraternity administrators. However, the wording of the regulations suggests that head officials had the right to examine not only the matters of the fraternity but also all disputes between the members, regardless of their nature. If this reading is correct, then, for example, if several members of the organization decided to form a merchant partnership, all issues that

might arise in the course of their trading activity, were to be examined by the head administrators of the fraternity.

Parnašim serving as judges enjoyed a wide range of options that could have been applied to the defendants to make them answer for their crimes. For example, they had a right to investigate the case even in the absence of the accused. Fraternity chapter also entitled head administrators to apply all sorts of penalties to restore justice, even those not mentioned in the chapter. Moreover, the members of the fraternity who sued each other had to pay an additional fee of two ducats, as the very fact of a trial between two fraternity members was considered to be an offense.

It was not the only case when head administrators were entitled by the chapter to be in charge of group solidarity. They had to raise money from the fraternity members to buy a proper gift in case association members were invited to participate in a celebration or festival.

Association's head administrators distributed money for the poor each month. This money was collected as donations from both members and non-members of the organization, and such distribution had a strong religious connotation. The fraternity also had developed certain mechanisms to support its distressed members, regardless of their congregation of origin, by means of gifts given on special occasions. *Parnašim* were supervising both the process of collecting the money and keeping it unused for any purpose other than supporting the poor. They also participated in charity personally by handing the money to the poor at the new moon evening.

Parnašim were also expected to enforce the rules of proper communication between fraternity members and make sure that such violations as threats, beating or insults never occur or receive a proper punishment in form of a fee. Improper behaviour towards fraternity's officials received stricter punishment than quarrels between members.

The ritual role of the head administrators came last in the chapter. They were entitled to give permission to the cantor to start the rite, namely begin reciting certain texts (*Tanhumim* and *Selihot*). The start of the ritual required additional effort from the fraternity officials. The messenger (*šammaš*) was obliged to come to the houses of the association members to wake them

up and after that, he had to go through the ghetto calling people to come to the synagogue and join the fraternity in its prayers.

Observance of the rite is called a “duty” in the chapter and a special category of the association’s members called *the privileged ones* is given its name as such members are exempted from this duty along with such duties as attending the fraternity’s gathering, participation in public processions, being an official or praying with other fraternity members. The focus of the regulations remains on the everyday operations that ensured the proper functioning of the fraternity and its capability to perform the ritual.

Conclusion

In the second chapter, the ordinary members of the fraternity were recognized as having a much greater degree of independence, goodwill, and benevolent behaviour than in the previous set of regulations. At the same time, the activities of the fraternity became more and more dependent on the donations made by both members and non-members.³ As a result, the system of power that was previously concerned with the one body of actors – *parnašim* – slowly changes to a polycentral model concerned with the wishes of both internal and external actors.

The voluntary associations like the fraternity in question accepted as members all Venetian Jews capable of paying entrance fees regardless of their ethnocultural affiliation. This organizational aspect seems important in context of the high level of fragmentation of the Jewish communities of the Eastern Mediterranean at the early modern period. Mass migrations (for instance, the flight of Sephardim from the Iberian Peninsula, the relocation policy of the Ottoman sultans, see Hacker 1992) that affected such communities determined their complex structure. On the one hand, there existed Jewish population that saw itself as ingenious (e.g. Romaniote, Greek-speaking Jews of Balkans and Asia Minor), and, on the other hand, the

migrants tried to secure and extend their affiliations with places of origin and corresponding local traditions.

As a result, the Jewish “community” of a given Mediterranean town or city consisted of a number of congregations with varying origins, economic specialization and peculiarities of the liturgy. If a congregation had a chance to be recognized as separate by a non-Jewish administration, it used it. For instance, Sephardic merchants of Venice had a paragraph included in a chapter from Venetian government that confirmed that they were not to be held responsible for the debts incurred by the Tedeschi congregation that consisted mostly of Jews of German and Central European origin (Ravid 1976).⁴ Such arrangements originally meant to support the refugees and enhance their chances to adapt, slowly turned to be the obstacles in communal development.

The process of horizontal networking development in the Mediterranean communities is connected with forging a new identity and adaptation to the changing economic situation. Instead of a Jew who was likely to partner in trade with other Jews of the same background, there emerged a demand for a Jew associating himself with a larger entity and capable of large-scale cross-congregational interactions. Benevolent fraternities provided one of the options to facilitate such interactions.

The fraternity accepted donations from the members of all congregations. Everyone willing could become a *šammaš* and be confirmed in this position through open elections. Jews from all ghettos that were congregation-specific have been called to participate in the rite in the morning. At the same time, no one could be forced to become a member and embrace the duties and responsibilities of such. The membership in fraternities was not hereditary in contrast to the membership in congregation councils that gave the right to have a say in the matters of the congregation (see Carpi 2003). Fraternities did not provide access to the essential religious infrastructure such as synagogues or butcheries

of sanctions in Venetian Hevrat Shomrim la-Boker” delivered during the XI EAJS Congress in Krakow).

⁴ For further discussion of the legal status of the Venetian Jewish see, for example, Ravid 1987,

Ravid 1994; for the examination of the “ghetto” concept see, for example, Cooperman 2017, Ravid 2017; for the role of Jews in Venetian economy see, for example, Arbel 1989, Ravid 1991.

and so could not rely solemnly on the threat of ex-communication to force their members to pay taxes and fees. Instead, they served as meeting grounds, offering a place and a time when the members of different congregations could pray, cooperate and communicate, and *parnasim* were in direct charge of keeping these grounds well-organised, thoroughly supervised and ready to serve.

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Evgeniya Zarubina
Institute of Oriental Studies
Russian Academy of Sciences
Department of Oriental Written Sources
e-mail: evgeniya.zarubina93@gmail.com

SUMMARY

Hevrat Šomerim la-Boqer is one of the communal organizations at the Jewish community of Venice at the end of the 16th - beginning of the 17th century. Through the examination of the topics addressed in the fraternity regulations and the discussion of the different functions of the head administrators (including juridical and ritual), I am going to reflect on the role that fraternity had in the framework of the Venetian Jewish community. The analysis of the society's administrative system suggests that the fraternity, though presenting itself as a ritual in purpose, was engaged in a wide range of social activities like charity, networking, and status. It served a vehicle of not only religious but also a social expression for its members among Venetian Jews

KEYWORDS: Manuscript; Venice; Minute book; 16-17th centuries; Communal fraternities; *Šomerim la-Boqer*.