

ABSTRACT

KABBALAH AND MARRIAGE CUSTOMS IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

Eliezer Baumgarten and Uri Safrai

Around 1538, the Jewish community of Rome was in an uproar. According to local custom, the bride was to stand at the groom's left. Seemingly, in the wake of Ashkenazi immigration to Italy, a new custom had taken hold: the bride was placed to the right of the groom.

In this paper, we discuss the responsa of two Rabbis who addressed this issue: that of Rabbi Yehuda Ben Michael – 'the Doctor's Master', an unknown scholar who lived in Rome. His responsum shows that he explained the ancient Jewish customs of Rome to the city officials. The second responsum was written by Rabbi Yaakov Israel Pinchi, who was a well-known *posek* who served as the rabbi of Recanati. In his responsum, Pinchi argued strongly against the position taken by 'the Doctor's Master'.

These responsa reveal the conduct of Rome's rabbis and community leaders as well as the relations between halakhic authorities in the Papal States in that period. They also provide insight into broader and more fundamental issues of concern to the Jewish community in this region. Both responsa demonstrate the dominant place of Kabbalah, particularly of the Zohar in these rabbis' halakhic adjudication and show the different ways they dealt with the challenges of their time. Rabbi Yehuda sought to preserve the ancient Roman custom, while Rabbi Yaakov Israel Pinchi rejected the local custom in favor of the traditions recently introduced by the new immigrants.