

Dear friends of Shir Hadash,

Koheleth (Ecclesiastes) declares that “there is nothing new under the sun”, yet it is true that things are always being renewed and renewing the world we live in. Shir Hadash endeavors to meet the need in Florence for a renewal of Judaism.

This is not the first progressive Jewish experience in our city. In fact in 1952, the “Italian Union for Progressive Judaism” was formed. To promote the formation and development of that association, Leo Baeck, principal founder in 1926 of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), had urged one of his young Italian students, Veronica Prensky, to move from London to Florence. Veronica joined a group of Florentine Jews, which included Guglielmo Vita and his son Virginio, Angelo Orvieto, and Roberto Assagioli, a doctor and psychotherapist, trained as a psychoanalyst, who started the school of psychosynthesis. After a few years in Florence, Veronica Prensky married Virginio Vita and they had two sons; today in their fifties, the sons live in Israel. Veronica and Virginio both died in Florence a few years ago. That first nucleus of progressive Jews in Florence published a quarterly magazine, *Hakkol - The Voice* of the Italian Union for Progressive Judaism, and managed to remain active for ten or so years, at which point it disbanded without having spread to other Italian cities. Apparently the time was not right for this type of experience, which today is feasible and shows good promise for growth in Italy. We can rightly declare that Shir Hadash today is continuing a project which began in Florence in 1952 and was suspended in the early 60s.

To understand how close that earlier experience was to ours, I will read to you from the second article of the by-laws of the Italian Union for Progressive Judaism (1952): “the Association adapts the defining principles of the World Union of Progressive Judaism” referred to in its own by-laws, of which it seems opportune to report the three articles of the preface:

1. The World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), inspired by the faith of the Prophets that Israel has the mission to spread the knowledge of God, declares that its faith obliges Israel to work until Jews, and all mankind, increasingly recognize the religious and ethical need for righteousness, brotherly love and universal peace.
2. The WUPJ, convinced of the capacity for growth within the Jewish religion, declares that every generation of Jews has the duty to harmonize the religious teachings and practices of its fathers [*sic*] with the development of human thought, with the progress of knowledge and with the changes in living conditions.
3. The WUPJ is deeply aware of the great responsibilities, tasks and opportunities presented by the State of Israel in the religious sphere to world Judaism. It strongly feels its responsibility to do all that is in its power to help realize in Israel, and wherever Jews are living, the best and highest ideals of our faith.

Since its inception, Shir Hadash has always referred to the WUPJ, as did the Florentine association of the 50s, which, in the first edition of *Hakkol – The Voice*, said this:

“We think we should start by making it clear what Progressive Judaism is. This will avoid misunderstandings and forestall unjustified criticism. Let us first specify that Progressive Judaism is not a well-defined and established form of Judaism, as opposed to others. Instead, it is a dynamic concept of the Jewish religion, or rather of the entire Jewish way of life. Progressive Judaism can be considered a

concept which is both historic and prophetic. In fact it proposes to examine the successive changes and developments which Judaism has experienced through the centuries, and the reciprocal exchanges between it and the various cultures with which it has come into contact along the way. From this basis Progressive Judaism proposes to discern which Jewish expressions of thought and religious life are most compatible with contemporary life and try to discover in what direction it could best develop in order to accomplish our mission for humanity, to launch it toward the great goal of the coming of the Kingdom of God.”

Roberto Assagioli, in the introduction to the pamphlet (translated and published by him in 1950) “Liberal Judaism” by Israel Mattuck, specifies that “Liberal Judaism is not made up of little groups of dissidents or of persons more or less “assimilated”. It is a vigorous movement, firmly grafted to the old trunk of Judaism, from which it draws its life force, but which expresses itself in new manifestations, more suited to our times.

There has been change and innovation in Judaism since ancient times, and to a greater extent than is generally believed, but a true reform movement began only with the emancipation of the European Jews at the beginning of the 1800s. It originated in Germany and was propagated in England, in France, and – after 1840 – In America, where it saw its greatest development.”

In this last decade, as you know, various Progressive Jewish groups similar to ours have begun in Italy. In 2003, after some years of working together informally, four young American Jewish women living in Florence, Sarah Rubenstein, Susanna Myers, Rebekah Serin and Sharon Strauss, together with two older Italian men, Ivan Gottlieb and myself, decided to form Shir Hadash as Florence’s progressive congregation, approving and registering our by-laws with the notary Alessandra Salimbeni. I would like to cite the first two points of the preface to the by-laws, which help to explain the spirit of our congregation.

- a) a) SHIR HADASH is an independent congregation of Jews who, having accepted the founding principles of Progressive Judaism, with which they share history, culture and practices, create a synagogue with the aim to assure, in addition to institutional rabbinic services (milah, bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation or ben/bat torah, qiddushin, qevurah), regular religious services for shabbat and the holidays that punctuate the Hebrew calendar.
- b) b) SHIR HADASH attributes the same rights and responsibilities to men and women; it considers to be Jewish the children of Jewish fathers as well as the children of Jewish mothers; it encourages and embraces non-Jewish spouses who wish to give a Jewish identity to the family that they are building with their Jewish spouse, and welcomes into the congregation “mixed” couples who wish to remain so, along with their children; it esteems and sustains the request for conversion by those who intend to join the Jewish people and, having become Jews by choice, accept the Covenant of Abraham.

Sarah Rubenstein was elected President of the congregation and she guided it until 2011, with the help of many of us. The creation of Shir Hadash, as I said, happened simultaneously and in connection with other Italian groups, with international encouragement and support. In fact we are recognized and sustained by various American congregations, and are part of the WUPJ and the EUPJ. In the last 10-15 years the great social and cultural changes which have happened in Italy have made it possible for us to pull together a variety of energies and experiences which have given life to our heterogeneous and dynamic group. These aspects have been captured well in the congratulations sent to us by Andrea Zanardo, rabbi of the Reformed synagogue of Brighton and Hove in England, and which I here report:

"Shiru l'Adonay Shir Hadash, ki niflaot assa" - Sing to the Eternal a new song, because God has done miraculous things. (Ps. 98:1)

Dear friends of Shir Hadash,

This passage comes to mind every time I think of our community. To have founded and sustained a progressive congregation in Florence for 10 years is truly a miracle. And this community, this congregation, is not only 10 years old, it is looking forward to the future with an enviable surety. A miracle that is standing on its own two feet, and more, is walking steadily, notwithstanding its often unfavorable environment.

You (We) have successfully been able to bring together different Jews (and this is already a miracle!) from different backgrounds and cultures: Italy, the United States, Israel, England, Sephardis, Ashkenazis, Italians... We can point to Shir Hadash as an example of how pluralism and mutual enrichment are the pathway for the future of Judaism in Italy.

Hazak hazak veithasek, and of course, yesher koach"

In this congregation, whose existence may be a miracle, but is also the fruit of many people's commitment, we have had good and bad phases, just as in any other association. The challenges that today face us I will indicate in three points:

- 1) We must continue to consolidate the integration of our diversity; or, better put, we must work to be a more united community, feeling that all of us are progressive Jews, less influenced by our particular origins; not an easy task.
- 2) We must open ourselves to the city, become known to the Florentines and improve our communication with other religious groups, emerge from our marginal situation; this task also will require much work, and is made more difficult by the fact that many of us live outside Florence.
- 3) We need to promote the formation of a national organization which can gather the different local experiences and support them, working to coordinate and represent with one voice the examples of Progressive Judaism, both in Italy and abroad.

I thank all those who have worked for Shir Hadash, and especially Rabbi Leigh Lerner from Montreal and his wife, Loren who are with us tonight, and all the rabbis who have accompanied us, and have expressed their solidarity to our community in their letters, and I thank all of you for your participation. Wishing a cordial mazel tov for our next ten years,

Sandro Ventura
President, Shir Hadash