This primary text, dated 11 October 1720, is taken from a pinkas belonging to the Jewish community of Padua. It concerns the establishment of an eruv hatserot, a boundary covering most of the city in which Jews would be permitted to carry possessions on the Sabbath. References to contemporary eruvin ordinarily appear in responsa literature. Perhaps uniquely, this document provides communal context for the construction of the Padua eruv. In so doing, it sheds light on the social and religious lives of Italian Jewry in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Padua’s Jewish community at the time consisted of approximately seven hundred people. Three official synagogues populated the ghetto – serving the respective Ashkenazic, Italian, and Sephardic populations – but the different ethnic groups lived under one political banner (unlike Venetian Jewry, for instance, which technically consisted of separate communities). As such, the Padua community employed only one rabbi, who was responsible for all religious matters.

The rabbi involved in the construction of the eruv, Isaiah Bassan, strengthened the community’s relations with the Mantuan rabbinate. Although Padua had been under Venetian control for centuries, the Jews of Venice and Padua were not particularly connected on a rabbinic level during the first half of the eighteenth century. In contrast, through Bassan and others, the Jews of Padua and Mantua retained strong rabbinic and social ties spanning several decades, demonstrating that communal identity could be defined across political, economic, and cultural boundaries.

Contemporary documents in Padua pinkasim refer to a drop in religious observance and a struggle to maintain a presence in the community’s once thriving bet midrash. Yet, despite or because of this, members of the community’s scholarly elite, including men with rabbinic ordination and/or
medical degrees, formed a confraternity called Mevakshe Hashem, which was devoted to studying and copying mystical texts. Core members of the group were inspired by Bassan, and especially his father-in-law Benjamin Kohen Vitale, and later teamed with Moses Hayim Luzzatto in an attempt to form a ‘perfected community.’

The document’s appearance as a copied text in a manuscript owned by the Pesaro rabbi Isaiah Romanin, who had been a member of both Mevakshe Hashem and Luzzatto’s circle, suggests that this eruv was deeply significant to kabbalists in Padua. Luzzatto himself considered it to be Bassan’s great tikun. As such, the document reflects the nexus of general communal behavior and a rabbinic attempt at religious rectification. It may also elucidate a mentality that (self-) identified rabbis as mystically responsible for communal spiritual welfare.

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1 Luzzatto used the term קיבוץ שלמים in his introduction to theosophical Kabbalah, Derekh Hashem.
With God’s Help

From one generation to the next, our ancestors have removed obstacles from the path of the people so that they not unwittingly stumble into sin, particularly [with respect to] those prohibitions relating to the Sabbath. Because many simpletons carelessly remove and bring in possessions from the ghetto to the outside and from the outside to the ghetto, against the words of our sages, the honorable Shemariah Conian, one of the memunim, and the honorable Samuel Katz Cantarini, one of the parnasim, saw it good and efficacious to establish an eruv as had been done in other communities in Italy, such as those in Mantua and Reggio, in order to permit [people] to carry items in and out [of the ghetto] without unwitting iniquity.

Because the eruv cannot be constructed from outside the ghetto to within the ghetto or from within the ghetto outwards except with permission from the Minister of the Treasury, as is well-known in our law, they went before the honorable camerlengo, Signore Giacomo Contarini, and informed him of the content of the request. He graciously heeded their voice, and granted the necessary permission according to the law. Although it may be a common assumption among the masses that such an eruv would necessitate having the keys of the city handed over for a short time, this is a total error as known to erudite individuals. Therefore, we did not need to do so at all. So the rabbi Judah Briel of Mantua wrote to our rabbi, and these are his words: “people can only dream about having the keys to the city handed over. The custom to establish an eruv began in my day, while the leader of our community was Rabbi Moses Zacut (of blessed memory), and there was no other activity except to give one ducat to his excellency the Duke, and also,
afterwards, [to provide] officials of his honor the Emperor with coffee and chocolate.” These were the words of the aforementioned rabbi.

And so, we also gave the honorable camerlengo mentioned above a pair of silk stockings, and he gave us consent for a 50-year period to establish the eruv in the synagogue according to the law. And with this, [people have] permission to carry out and bring in, from the ghetto to the outside and therefrom to the ghetto, and to carry things throughout the entire city — except for the Castello, which we left forbidden according to the law and the enactment of our sages. And so it was on Friday, the eve of the Fast of Atonement, 5481 [= 11 October 1720].

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4 Jews were permitted to carry throughout the city, except in the Castello Carrarese at the southeast corner of the city on the Bacchiglione River. At the time, the Castello may not have been in use. Between 1767 and 1777, its main tower was transformed into an astronomical observatory known as Specola.
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[HEBREW TEXT]