This volume records the proceedings of a conference held at the Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani and the Department of Historical Studies at the Università Ca’ Foscari of Venice in September 2007. It represents a joint venture between three institutions, the Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien, the Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, and the Department of Historical Studies at the Università Ca’ Foscari of Venice. The volume contains impressive contributions from eighteen international scholars of various disciplines on Jewish life in the Venetian Republic and its relationship to the ruling powers, the Church authorities, and neighboring Christians from the late medieval period to emancipation. The theme of the conference was interstizi, the “intersection of cultures” (Kenneth Stow’s translation; 31, n. 1), the points of commonality, or, according to Angela Möscher, “gli spazi d’incontro e di convivenza tra i membri delle due religioni” (the meeting place, the coexistence between Jews and Christians; 155). Renata Segre was the one scholar to speculate what interstizi implied in a strictly Venetian context, reminding her readers that until the fifteenth century Jews had been ostracized from the city-state. Whereas they had established communities in the medieval period on the Terraferma and in the Venetian colonies of Corfu and Crete, it was only after the War of the League of Cambrai in 1509 that they fled to the city-state and in 1516 were enclosed in the ghetto. Surely, it would seem, different types of interstizi would have found expression in the laguna than in the other areas of Venetian dominion.

But the editors of this volume argue in their introduction that their template of interstizi reacts against this type of Jewish historiography, which has tended to confine scholarly research to the Venetian ghetto and its exclusion from Christian society. The editors reject ghettoization as a defining characteristic that precluded cultural, economic, social, scientific, or religious interaction with those outside its confinement. I suggest that we contemplate
interstizi on a theoretical level as intervening metaphorical spaces. In this way, the subject of hybridity can be properly addressed in detail and one can discuss the ways in which Jews (in Benjamin Arbel’s words; 281) were able to bypass “seclusion” and allow for “integration” with Christians and vice versa, influencing and being influenced by what was outside their communal existence.

Some of the essays do precisely this. Rabbi Elia Capsali of Corfu’s personal interstizi with Christian society were, according to Giacomo Corazzol, a real attachment to and passion for Venice as well as a deep respect and fascination for the Serenissima’s political prudence, which he displayed in Seder Eliyyahu Zuta. His historical analysis is even more fascinating, considering that Jewish historiography was arguably nonexistent between Flavius Josephus and the sixteenth century. In a similar vein, Karl E. Grözinger’s refreshing approach to the work of Rabbi Leon de Modena argues that much of his polemical work was in essence an appeal to unify Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The study of science could also generate interesting levels of theoretical acculturation. Robert Jütte examines Jewish and Christian literary reactions to the birth of conjoined twins that occurred in the Venetian ghetto in 1575, exactly one hundred years after the blood libel accusation that had destroyed the Jewish community in Trent. He argues convincingly by examining the tracts and broadsheets written on this topic that this rare occurrence represented a transreligious experience, bringing together the two communities in terms of the fascination, concern, and shared responsibility for this tragedy that were expressed at the time.

However, when it comes to the medieval period, the attempt to define interstizi in a Venetian context is vague and problematic. One major hurdle is the limited sources available for this kind of study, so that conclusions must remain suggestive. Alfred Haverkamp, who synthesizes a large quantity of material and focuses on a comparative demographic study of Jewish settlements in northern Italy and Germany in the late medieval period, runs up against a shortage of written evidence on the Jews in Germany and the late development of public notarial documentation. Nonetheless, he fills gaps persuasively and traces the migratory patterns of Jews in these areas, their economic activities, and their relationship with local Christians, but he prefers to use the categories of inclusion and exclusion rather than integration or acculturation.

Rachele Scuro offers a fascinating comparison between the commercial and versatile resilience of Ashkenazi Jews in Bassano in the fifteenth century and the larger Roman community in Vicenza. In Bassano, where the Jewish presence was no more than two or three nuclear Ashkenazi families, Jews adapted themselves to the needs of Christian society, particularly in the trade