In recent years, the history of the Jews in Italy in the modern era has been at the center of many studies, which are beginning to painstakingly trace the affairs of this minority group within the major events of the period. Based on sources which have long been overlooked by studies on this subject and on a renewed scientific sensibility, a profile is beginning to emerge of a history built on a range of interactions between Jews and Christians, notwithstanding the centuries-old discrimination to which the second subjected the first. The phenomenon of the ghetto, which was without a doubt the most characteristic and significant experience of the period, is now being investigated “beyond” and “across” the walls. On to the well-known history of discrimination, of marginalization, and of the pressures of Catholic proselytizing, a narrative which is full of nuances is being superimposed, where, at the center, are the tumultuous relations between Christians and Jews and the infinite individual stories which animated them. In depth investigations of administrative, economic and judiciary documents (including those of the Roman Inquisition), together with innovative studies of objects, collections and libraries, as well as more traditional research on notary registries now portray a complex and stratified society, in continuous contact with the external world yet capable of firmly maintaining its otherness. If, on the one hand, this now flourishing historiography of the ghetto – which is even a bit “revisionist” – is finally succeeding at putting the Jews “on the map” of Italian history, on the other hand the great attention paid to the position of the group in national affairs has, perhaps, contributed to relegating this research to the margins of the international discussion about Jewish history.

The political fragmentation between States that characterized Italian history until 1861 plays an important role in this trend. Studies of the Jewish communities of Central and Northern Italy (after the final expulsions from Sicily and the South during the first half of the 16th century) have often assumed a local character, ultimately describing a history of ghettos and of communities where each case seems to stand alone, always remaining separate and cut off from more general events. The evident disparity between the general conditions assured to the Jews from place to place and from time to time, which in turn were the result of ongoing negotiations on a dual track - the Jews with the authorities and the Jews with ecclesiastic institutions - translates in to a history of infinite exceptions. It is a history of individual cities and individual communities, each with its leaders and its particular capacity to be a part of general events; but each also cut off from the rest of Jewish Italy and, as a consequence, from the rest of the Jewish world. In this fashion, the walls of the ghetto have ended up constructing the dominant interpretative view of Jewish Italy, and obscuring for the modern era the paradigm of inter-Jewish networks and of uninterrupted mobility which has been convincingly proposed regarding medieval history by Michele Luzzati and by many others. Now, however, the scene is changing. On one side, there are important results emerging from investigations regarding relations between Jews and Christians, and, on the other, there is renewed attention on relations between Jews and Jews, within the Italian ghettos, but also and foremost outside the cramped confines of the pre-Unity regional States. Research on the circulation of books and objects, which is a subject that in large part remains unexplored, is bearing first fruits in this direction, revealing how, exactly, the connections across the wall constitute a central (and until now neglected) aspect of the history of the Italian ghettos in the modern era.

The impact of the Western Sephardi Diasporas on Jewish Italy, in turn, plays a role, at least in part, in this discussion. Studies on the arrival of the Sephardim have achieved their best results concerning Ferrara and Venice in the early 1500s, starting from the saga of Dona Gracia Nasi and on, thanks to the extraordinary work undertaken in the archives of the Estonian city by Aron di Leone Leoni. In general, and outside of these small exceptional cases, investigations are concentrated on the moment of settlement and the first checks on the religious identities of the refugees, emphasizing their hybrid allegiances and their negotiations with power at many levels. Furthermore, at least for the period of the 1500s, great attention has been dedicated to the cultural ferment and to the innovations brought by the Spanish and Portuguese, who, arriving in Italy during the golden era of Hebrew printing, knew how to contribute to it in a significant way. In this case as well, however, a local interpretation has prevailed, centered on the paradigm of the exceptional benevolence or extraordinary aversion of Princes and Cities; as a result, the broader importance of these events has been overshadowed, both with respect to the overall phenomenon of the Western Sephardi Diasporas and with respect to their interest, at the same time, as the cause of Sephardic settlement across a large majority of the lands of Italy. Yet, if one begins to observe with attention the life of the communities who were called upon to contend with the Sephardim, even over a long time and in fully functioning ghettos, themes and problems emerge which are less uniquely Italian than is too often imagined. Questions related to relations between the Sephardim and the local Jews, to the formation of relations with Christian institutions and society, to the role of a group of cultural, familial and economic international networks, and to the conduct between Jews and Jews, as well as between Jews and non-Jews permit, in fact, the productive insertion of Italian affairs into this markedly global history. The work of Francesca Trivalleto on the international and intercultural commerce to and from Livorno in the 1700s, after all, speaks for itself.