

## SICILY'S SEMITIC SIDE

By Hilary Larson • December 8, 2009

When Barbara Aiello made her first visit to her parents' home regions of southern Italy, she was amazed to discover that her Sicilian relatives customarily avoided eating dairy and meat together, and discarded any eggs with a hint of blood. "Things I considered family tradition or superstition were actually Jewish traditions," she said.

But in an overwhelmingly Catholic region where Jewish families had undergone forced conversions during inquisitions, Jewish practices had become assimilated into Italian habit.

"I have a priest and two nuns in my own Marrano family," said Aiello, a Reform rabbi, using the term for Jews of the Sephardic diaspora, many of whom fled the Iberian inquisitions and settled amid the lemon groves and arid Mediterranean cliffs of Sicily.

That decades-ago visit sparked Aiello's fascination with Southern Italian Jewish ancestry. In turn, her research spawned a career built around introducing the Italian-Jewish diaspora to its heritage. Aiello is Italy's first Reform and first female rabbi; she leads a congregation in the Calabria region that is a headquarters for non-Orthodox Southern Italian Jews, and conducts frequent tours of the region for foreign visitors.

Aiello is a frequent collaborator with Amalfi Life, a Brooklyn-based tour company that specializes in Southern Italy and Italian Jewish culture. Amalfi Life's popular Jewish heritage tours combine typically Italian pleasures — stunning landscapes, historic towns and mouthwatering food — with the research and insights of Aiello and other scholars who have begun uncovering the deep Jewish roots in this most Catholic country.

For Jewish visitors, there is much to discover. Of the 26 million Italian-Americans living in the U.S., she notes, about 80 percent trace their ancestry to these two regions. Many of these vowel-laden folk either have Jewish ancestry or are married to Jews. Rabbi Aiello notes that new scholarship puts the pre-Inquisition presence in Southern Italy at 50 percent of the population or more. "So the chances are greater than not that an Italian-American will have Jewish roots," she noted. "You always hear about Italians and Jews being a popular combination, but the demographics really bear that out."

But since most Italian- and Jewish-Americans do not speak Italian, and most Italians do not speak English, the language barrier has posed a significant obstacle for travelers seeking their roots. This is where an organized tour comes in handy. For clients of Amalfi Life tours, Rabbi Aiello can even trace the roots of Jewish surnames, uncovering fascinating tidbits of history in the process.

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For instance, Aiutomicristo — literally, “Help me, Christ” — is a common Italian-Jewish surname borne by conversos, or Jews forced to convert to Catholicism. That seems contrary to logic, but it makes perfect sense: conversos sought the most Christian name possible, aggressively asserting their religious bona fides in order to save their proverbial skin.

Today’s postwar Jewish population in southern Italy is small and somewhat scattered; Rabbi Aiello notes that Jews are not organized into a cohesive community in the American sense. Earlier this decade, Rabbi Aiello said, she inaugurated the first new synagogue in Calabria in 500 years, Ner Tamid del Sud, with a membership that stretches from Naples to Sicily. She also directs its affiliate organization, the Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria, which helps Italian Jews to trace their roots. As the first non-Orthodox and female rabbi in this religiously doctrinaire country, “there isn’t a rabbi in Italy that will work with me,” she declared. But she has had great success in assembling local Italian Jews for holiday events, including her annual Passover seder. In Palermo, as many as 30 locals have attended the seders alongside touring guests from the U.S. and abroad. A Sicilian tradition, carried on by Rabbi Aiello and Amalfi Life travelers, is a seder held on the fifth night of Passover. “Historically, the Christians organized it to protect Jews who were under scrutiny during the Inquisition,” explained the rabbi. “It was held to confound the Inquisitors,” who would have been alert for seder activity on the first or second nights.

Amalfi Life’s upcoming Jewish heritage tour begins in Sicily, moves on to Calabria — the “toe” of Italy’s boot — and finishes in Rome, for a total of eight nights and 2,000 years of history, according to Amalfi Life Director Laurie Howell. Leading the tour will be Rabbi Aiello in Sicily and Calabria and Laura Supino, a Roman-Jewish scholar, in Rome. Food on the trip is not kosher, but kosher-style as the region allows: vegetarian pastas, kosher fish and the like.

The adventure begins in Ortigia, an island area of the city of Siracusa in Sicily with a historic Jewish quarter. “Sicily was a part of Greater Greece in the time of Pythagorus,” observed Rabbi Aiello. “There’s tremendous cultural heritage, archaeology. When you couple that with the Jewish heritage, it comes as a surprise to many people.” A Catholic church in Palermo’s Jewish quarter is typical of this semi-hidden past: its former incarnations, as a synagogue and then a mosque, are evident in the Semitic inscriptions still visible on its walls.

In Siracusa, a highlight is the oldest extant mikveh in Western Europe; it was built around the sixth century and in use for 1,000 years until Jews were expelled from the city in the 1500s. “It was underground, hidden, and now the Jewish community has purchased it,” said Rabbi Aiello, adding that the mikveh has been restored and is open for public touring.

Taormina, where the rabbi’s mother’s family is from, is one of Sicily’s premier resort towns. In Catania, Amalfi Life travelers tour the city with a local guide who represents the local Jewish community.

Once on the mainland, Rabbi Aiello leads visitors to Reggio di Calabria and Bova Marina, where local archaeologists explain the importance of a fourth-century synagogue site and an Archaeological Museum contains artifacts from ancient Hebrew settlers. History is balanced with a two-night retreat and a Shabbat service in the rural village of Serrastretta, where Rabbi Aiello lives and works.

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Other highlights include a visit to one of Italy's largest World War II concentration camps, located in the Calabrian countryside. Unlike its northern counterparts, this was not a camp for extermination, but for labor: about 4,000 Jews from across Southeastern Europe were interred to work, in modest structures that now house a museum.

In Rome, tourists spend two days with Supino visiting the Great Synagogue, the Museo Ebraico and the former ghetto. An excursion out of town winds down the trip in Appia Pignatelli, with a private visit to the Hebrew Catacombs, and finally the first-century ruins of the synagogue at Ostia Antica, a prominent archeological site.

“We are the true people of the book, always learning,” observed Rabbi Aiello. “And this is the Italy that nobody knows.”

You can reach Amalfi Life at [www.amalfilife.com](http://www.amalfilife.com) or by calling Laurie Howell at (347) 240-1244. Hilary Larson is The Jewish Week's travel writer.

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