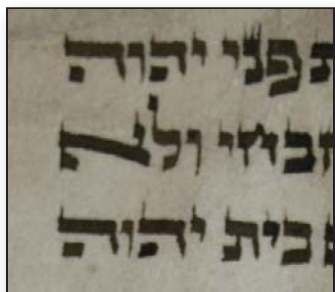


A Special Torah Comes Home to Southern Italy



*"This large, lightweight Torah is about 300 years old, of Ashkenazy style but full of special Sephardic based Kabbalistic letters, most likely from the Northern Italian regions, and is extremely special. There are only a few of these surviving in the world today. It is a true collectors' antique Torah."
~David First*



Thanks to the dedication and generosity of Connie and David First of the Torah Museum and Torah Rescue Project, Synagogue Ner Tamid del Sud (The Eternal Light of the South) has been blessed with its very own Torah scroll.

As the first and only modern liberal rabbi in Italy and the first and only woman rabbi as well, I faced the challenge of finding a Torah in a country that still has yet to come to terms with the gender and denominational issues that are no longer stumbling blocks in other parts of the world. Torah scrolls that modern liberal congregations could use often end up in Jewish museums or in deep storage. Sadly here in Italy it is still seen as a negative for a woman or for a modern progressive/reform Jew to touch the Torah.

So it was that our synagogue's quest for a Torah reached well beyond Italy's borders and out into the wider world. Our request included a description of the difficulties that so many Italian Jews here in the "toe of the boot" face as they begin to discover and embrace their Jewish roots. This is our story:

We call ourselves "anousim" (Hebrew for "the forced ones") because our roots date back to the time of Inquisition when the long arm of Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, reached from Spain into Sicily and Calabria, forcing Jews, under pain of torture or death, to give up their religion and convert to Christianity. My own family's journey, from the persecutions and "auto da fe" (public burning of Jews) in Toledo, Spain, to Gibraltar, to Morocco, to Sicily, then to the "toe of the Boot" in Calabria and finally to the Calabrian mountains, is not unique. Literally thousands of Jews made the same trip. Modern historians now believe that prior to the Inquisition, nearly 50 per cent of the entire population of Calabria and Sicily was Jewish!

I have returned to the town of my father, a small village called Serrastretta which was organized by five Jewish families running from persecution. We have established a synagogue here that is the first active synagogue in Calabria in 500 years. In 2007 we celebrated our first Bar Mitzvah and first Jewish wedding since Inquisition times. And in December, 45 people from the village joined

rabbi barbara

Rabbi Barbara Aiello



We hope one day to have a collection of Torahs that rivals the Prague Torah Collection pre-WWII which had Torahs that were over 1,000 years old. We want to do this because we see each Torah as a living light. We need to preserve these Torahs so people can study them for centuries to come."

~Connie and David First,
The Torah Museum and
Torah Rescue Project

me for Chanukah and each one told a story about their family's traditions -- stories such as lighting one candle on Friday night, taking the blood spot out of cracked eggs, sitting on low chairs for seven days after a death -- each story indicating Jewish roots that have survived for centuries.

That's why we have named our synagogue Ner Tamid del Sud, or The Eternal Light of the South. We chose the name to celebrate the fact that despite centuries of persecution, struggle and tragedy, the eternal light of Jewish tradition here in Calabria never died.

In these days and times when studies indicate that the number of Jews worldwide is decreasing, we Italian Jews in the toe of the Boot are here to say that there is a vast population of lost and isolated Jews who are longing to come home. The Torah, the Tree of Life, for us Jews has been a unifying force for our people for thousands of years. A Sefer Torah for Ner Tamid del Sud would bring an important spiritual dimension to a people who are just now learning how precious their ancestral roots really are.

Connie and David First, organizers of a Torah Museum (www.TorahMuseum.org) and Torah Rescue Project came to our aid. And thanks to their dedication and generosity, a beautiful antique Italian Torah now rests in the Aron Kodesh, the Holy Ark, of our synagogue.

David's interest in Torah is deep and mystical. He writes, "About two years ago, I was asked to help find a small, lightweight Torah for our synagogue. My search led me to Ebay where I discovered that very old and rare Torah scrolls were being cut up and sold in pieces. Connie and I were bothered to see such a sight and we wondered if it would be feasible to start a museum and start buying up these old Torahs. I began by writing the sellers on EBay and buying their Torahs. This activity put me in contact with others who received Torahs from synagogues on condition that the scrolls would be buried. Horrified, we found out that these scrolls were not buried at all, and instead were being sold to Ebay dealers!"

David continues that, "As we began buying Torahs, suddenly some of the oldest Torahs in the world started finding their way to our home, some,

rabbi barbara

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"... our wedding would be like a light that would shine forever in the universe for all to see. What type of light did I want to shine? You helped to create that beautiful light for us nearly five years ago and it is with great pleasure and grateful hearts that we share the Torah with you and your congregation. "

~Connie First

called Gevil Torahs, were 400 to 600 years old and Kabbalistic Torahs from Europe that were hundreds of years old as well. As our collection grew, I learned a lot about Torahs and saw so many Torahs from all parts of the world with different styles of writing, different styles of parchment, and made in many different sizes. But I also met people who bought and sold Torahs like used car salesmen. They were people who called themselves religious but seemed to have no real spiritual connection to the Torah."

And David concludes, "We hope one day to have a collection of Torahs that rivals the Prague Torah Collection pre-WWII which had Torahs that were over 1,000 years old. We want to do this because we see each Torah as a living light. We need to preserve these Torahs so people can study them for centuries to come."

As we waited impatiently for Torah's arrival, David shared important information with us about the scroll that would soon grace our sanctuary. After his long discussion with Dr. Penkow, one of the leading Torah historians in the world, David emphasized that the Torah is truly very old and rare. Dr. Penkow believes that it dates back to the 16th or 17th century and is written in a style that was not seen after the 1700's. David explains, "This large, light weight Torah is about 300 years old, of Ashkenazy style but full of special Sephardic based Kabbalistic letters, most likely from the Northern Italian regions, and is extremely special. There are only a few of these surviving in the world today. It is a true collectors' antique Torah."

And so it was that after three long weeks languishing in a customs office in Milan, Torah came to Calabria. Connie packed the box herself and included an old ornate mantle, a delicate shield complete with tinkling bells and a shiny silver yad. And later I learned more about why David's dear wife, Connie wanted this particular Torah to make its way to us. Connie writes:

David suggested that I write this letter to you, because I have felt mystically connected to this situation and have spiritually learned a tremendous lesson about how all deeds are connected. If you recall in 2003, David and I were having difficulty finding a Rabbi to conduct our wedding ceremony because I had not "yet" converted to Judaism and as you

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"May the sound of the bells make tears of joy in all the eyes of your congregation as you dance in your synagogue with your wise old 'new Torah'".

*~David First, Director,
The Torah Museum*

know, many Rabbis frown on inter-faith marriages. One Rabbi stated that he would not marry an inter-faith couple, because many inter-faith couples tend to not lead a Jewish life. Regardless, you agreed to make our marriage ceremony in a synagogue possible and provided us with a wedding ceremony that was a beautiful start for our marriage. Within a year or so, I completed my conversion course, David began teaching the Torah class at our synagogue in Sun City, we formed the Torah Museum and began collecting antique Torahs.

A few years ago, I read an article in Reform Judaism about your move to Italy and have shared our wedding story with many people as a result. When we learned of your recent request for a Torah, I knew that we had to help you. I felt a desire so deeply in my soul, that I could not resist the thoughts of helping you. You were the only person to help us in our time of need in 2003 and to think that half way around the world and five years later, that we can return your kindness is an amazing feeling. In 2003, David and I contemplated a civil ceremony for our wedding and he left the decision to me. He commented that our wedding would be like a light that would shine forever in the universe for all to see. What type of light did I want to shine? You helped to create that beautiful light for us nearly five years ago and it is with great pleasure and grateful hearts that we share the Torah with you and your congregation. May G-d continue to bless you and your congregation. Shalom, Connie First

We here in Calabria are deeply touched, transformed really, by this extraordinary gift. Arriving just in time for Shavuot, our special Torah traveled north to Pitigliano to the synagogue there, "la piccola gerusalemme," where Gianluca Guelfand read from the scroll as he became Bar Mitzvah. On June 30, Austin Lazar with his father Michael, mother Illene and sister Sarah will travel from Connecticut to Calabria. Austin will be the first to read from our Italian Torah here in our Calabrian sanctuary as he becomes Bar Mitzvah.

David and Connie send us their greetings as they say, *"May the sound of the bells make tears of joy in all the eyes of your congregation as you dance in your synagogue with your wise old 'new Torah'".* **Thanks to David and Connie and the Torah Museum, we here in Italy could never be more blessed.**