Thinking Outside the Tzedakah Box

It's Time to Recognize and Embrace Italians with Jewish heritage

In a recent Washington Post article (May 5, 2008) where he eloquently assesses the status of Israeli and Diaspora Jews, columnist Charles Krauthammer writes,

"Israel's Jewish population has just passed 5.6 million. America's Jewish population was about 5.5 million in 1990, dropped to about 5.2 million 10 years later and is in a precipitous decline that, because of low fertility rates and high levels of assimilation, will cut that number in half by mid-century."

Krauthammer isn't the only one to sound the alarm about declining Jewish birthrate. Population studies, both Jewish and secular, some from as far back as 15 years, indicate that from Tel Aviv to Tampa and everywhere in between our Jewish numbers are shrinking. Researchers say there is no end in sight. As a rabbi who lives and works in Italy, I don't agree. My experience here in The Boot tells me that if we Jews can just start thinking "outside the tzedakah box," we will find, as Kulanu's Karen Primack writes in her book of the same title, "Jews in Places You Never Thought Of."

"You're Italian, you cant be Jewish!" With a surname like mine, "Aiello," I heard that comment all my life. Growing up in western Pennsylvania where Jews had names like Steinberg, Goldman and Cohen, I understand the confusion. Ashkenazi Jews, those with roots in Germany, Poland and Eastern Europe made up the vast majority of Jews in my town, my state and my country. Sephardi Jews, or those from the Middle East or the Mediterranean were practically unheard of in the American Jewish communities of the 1950's. Or, if Sephardic communities existed at all, few knew about it. With surnames like Rossi, Sonino, Mascaro and Sacerdoti we blended into the Italian-American melting pot. Back then Jews were narrowly defined by names and noses, something that in the world of the twenty-first century, we can ill-afford to do.

In 1492 when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled the Jews from the Spanish empire, we Sephardic Jews had one of two choices. Either we accepted forced conversion or we packed up and left town. Books written in this period and well into the twentieth century speak about the "death" of the Jews of Spain, Portugal, Sicily, Sardinia and Calabria, giving voice to the myth that a governmental edict could wipe us out.

Prior to the Expulsion and Inquisition, many modern Italian historians now believe that nearly 50 percent of the total population of Sicily and Calabria, the deep south of the Italian "Boot" was Jewish! Where earlier historians made their mistake was to assume that because synagogues no longer existed, Jews no longer existed. What these historians did not understand is that there is a vast difference between burning synagogues and closing Jewish schools, in other words, eliminating institutional Judaism, and what we Spanish and Italian Jewish actually did, which was to take our traditions into the closets, cellars and hidden rooms of our own homes.

For thousands of years, Jews practiced in secret. My own Italian grandmother took her Shabbat candles downstairs into the "cantina" so many times that when she came to America she did the same thing. Her

very first Friday night in Pittsburgh she gathered up her candles, challah and wine and headed downstairs. My father stopped her at the cellar door.

He said, "Mama, You're in America now, the "land of the free and the home of the brave!" But Nonna stopped him and said, "Shhh! Non sono sicura," (Ya never know!)

And that's how Jewish practices survived. Barak Obama calls it the "audacity of hope." We Jews call it sechel - good common sense. It they want to believe that they pressured us into giving up our religion, then good. Let them think that. We know better.

They take away our synagogue, we take the candles into our homes. They tell us we can't be Jews in the dining room, we take the candles into the basement. We can't have Rosh HaShanah for our new year? OK, we'll blow a horn on Dec. 31st (a Sicilian custom traced to the Jews)

We can't call it Pesach? We have to say "Pasqua?" OK, we'll eat "pane azimo" (unleavened bread) and when you ask us why we'll say. "Per la Pasqua dei ebrei" for the Easter of the Jews!

We'll put red strings over our baby's cribs but we won't say that's a Jewish tradition from the Kaballah. No, that's just too dangerous. Instead we use the red string to keep away the "evil eye."

When we break an egg into the bowl and we see a blood spot we'll make sure to take it out. Not because it's a kosher tradition. It might give us away to admit that. Instead we'll say that the blood spot just isn't healthy. And we will never eat dairy and meat in the same meal because "fa male," it's not good for the digestion.

No Tallit? No prayer shawls? No problem. We will take our skill in weaving and dyeing (attributed solely to the Jews of Sicily and Calabria) and secretly make our own religious garment, which today is the "vancale," or the Calabrian shawl that invokes the embrace of God.

And so it goes. For centuries we took our Jewish traditions into our homes and our hearts and slowly, at first for safety reasons, and then for cultural reasons, the religious meanings of these rituals were lost. Our precious Jewish customs became family traditions and sadly, nothing more.

"I've always felt Jewish!" I've heard this so often, mostly from Italian Americans whose families came to America from Calabria and Sicily and whose mothers, fathers and grandparents practiced an array of family customs that are steeped in Jewish tradition. Now the children of these Sicilian and Calabrian immigrants want to know more. They are hungry for any verification, anecdotal or documented hard copy, that will confirm a Jewish heritage that was so cruelly stolen from them by the Spanish Inquisition. Dozens of families have shared their stories with me and through our Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria (IjCCC) I

am honored to help them. We give them what we know that indicates Jewish ancestry -- surnames that derive from names of regions or towns, surnames that begin with Di or D' which indicate "son of" or the Hebrew "ben," translated surnames, such as "Aprile" that was once the Hebrew month, "Nisan." These are only a few examples among the many we have found that demonstrate Jewishness, Italian style.

Why go to all this trouble? Because Charles Krauthammer is right. Those who have had the luxury, the blessing really, of being acknowledged Jews, are fewer and fewer. But the numbers of those with Jewish ancestry who want to discover and embrace their Jewish heritage are on the rise. As Gary Tobin writes in his powerful book, "Opening the Gates". "I see people all around me who would be Jews if we helped them." It is time to extend the hand of Jewish friendship to the thousands of Italians who are just now discovering their Jewish roots and let them know that the Jewish community welcomes them home.

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