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RABBI BARBARA AIELLO • RELIGION COLUMNIST

For the Jews of Southern Italy, the Jewish festival of Passover was a special celebration of new beginnings. Like Jews the world over we gathered at the traditional seder table and remembered how the Hebrew slaves, whom the angel of death had miraculously "passed over," strapped large sheets of unleavened bread to their backs. We recounted how our ancestors, accompanied by righteous Egyptians who shared the Jewish belief in slavery's inherent evil, stepped out on faith and marched toward liberty. We ate the traditional foods, sang the traditional songs and toasted the birth of a new synagogue whose very existence gives testimony to the strength and courage of the Jewish people.

"Ner Tamid del Sud," the "Eternal Light of the South," represents the first organized, rabbi-led synagogue to emerge in the south of Italy (Calabria and Sicily) in what some historians say is more than 500 years. Gathering at the Passover table in Palermo (Sicily) and Platania (Calabria), Italians whose Jewish roots and traditions were all but destroyed by local persecutions including the Spanish Inquisition dipped "sedono" (celery) into vinegar and remembered the bitterness of those days when Jews were driven from their homes in the larger cities of Calabria and Sicily and forced to flee into the mountains.

"Platania is a good place for the seder," said one of our guests who has just discovered his grandmother's Jewish roots. "Just being here reminds me of how far we had to go to try to keep our traditions alive." From our seder table we could see the high mountains of Calabria that in mid-April were just beginning to turn green. Nearby were the small villages of Tiriolo, Decolatura, Serrastretta and Zangarona, each one with a "Via di Judeca," small enclaves that form the remnant of Calabria's strong and vibrant Jewish past, which is just now beginning to be documented.

Indeed, Professor Vincenzo Villella, local historian and author of "The Judeca of Nicastro -- The History of Calabrian Jews," writes, "Jews certainly had been present in Calabria, and generally in the South of Italy, since the beginning of Common Era, i.e. the very first years when Christianity spread. They were driven by dispersion ... into every Mediterranean land and from there they continued to move into the rest of Europe. The existence of a 4th century Jewish community, organized in a synagogue, is documented both in Reggio di Calabria and in Bova, while evidence of a Jewish presence in Calabria can be found in the Vita (Life) of St. Nilo di Rossano," a priest who lived in the 10th century!

rabbi barbara

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The larger town of Nicastro (part of what is now "Lamezia Terme") is home to the new synagogue, an appropriate venue especially since the entire Jewish Quarter of Nicastro is completely intact. True, there is a Catholic church built above the historical synagogue, but the "mikveh" or ritual bath still remains as well as the ancient arch at the entrance. Two years ago Mayor Gianni Speranza erected a bronze plaque dedicating the area to the memory of the "industrious Jewish people" who lived and worked there as far back as the 1300s.

"We are the oldest Jews in the Diaspora," says Angela Amato, a concert violinist living in Naples who along with her 6-year-old son, Alessandro attended the seder in Sicily. Angela is part of a dedicated group of Jewish families who work hard to bring Jewish tradition back to Southern Italy and who believe that celebrating major Jewish festivals is one way to make that happen. And it seems to be working. For our Passover seders law student Marco Marcellino learned all the seder blessings, Viviana prepared the ceremony for kindling the holiday candles and ceramic artist Salvo Parrucco, assisted as seder leader. It is Salvo's dream not only to revive Jewish tradition in his native Sicily, but to become a rabbi as well.

As our seder meals ended, in Sicily with Angela Amato's violin solo, "Yerushaliyim Shel Zahav," and in Calabria with a rousing "Avinu Shalom Alechim," the 60-plus participants kissed on both cheeks, Italian-style, hugged each other and wished a hearty "Chag Sameach," which is Hebrew for "Buona Festa," and "Happy Holiday." In the strength of our embrace we felt the strength of Jewish traditions that represent an important Passover sentiment. For us, the Jews of Southern Italy, hope never dies.

Rabbi Barbara Aiello is the first Reform and first woman rabbi in Italy. In addition to her work as rabbi of synagogue Ner Tamid del Sud in Italy, she is rabbinic advisor to Chavurah Ner Tamid in Bradenton. She can be reached at rabbi@rabbibarbara.com.

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello

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