

An Unforgettable Hanukka` Story – How the Jews Named Italy

BARBARA AIELLO December 4, 2013, 12:33 am

BLOGGER



Barbara Aiello Rabbi Barbara Aiello is the first woman and first non-orthodox rabbi in Italy. She opened the first active synagogue ... [\[More\]](#)

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It is the determined visitor who climbs the winding mountain road (*serpentuosa*, say the locals) to the southern Italian village of Serrastretta to find Synagogue Ner Tamid del Sud, The Eternal Light of the South, the first active synagogue in Calabria in 500 years.

As rabbi and founder, it is a joy and a challenge for me to work here, especially since Serrastretta is the village where all of my ancestors were born and raised – an isolated town where Jews settled and practiced in secret for over four hundred years. My father, Antonio Abramo Aiello, of blessed memory, was raised here and often he would recall the early years spent with his crypto-Jewish family:

“When I was a boy here in the village, the public school ended with the third grade. But Mama was determined that I should continue my education. She wanted me to know Torah so she found an older gentleman to teach me. Unfortunately he lived twenty-three kilometers down the mountain. But that did not deter my mother. She found a farmer who routinely made the trip to market which meant that twice a week I sat atop artichokes, or potatoes or broccoli while the farmer drove a horse drawn cart to Timpone, the Jewish Quarter of Nicastro. He went to market and I went to study.

“I never knew my teacher’s name. To me he was Maestro, and that was all. I think Jews were still afraid then of being found out. We studied Torah but his Jewish stories were the ones I liked best. Especially the one about how Italy got its name.”

And then my father would tell me a story that has been a part of Calabrian Jewish lore for centuries. The story is a fascinating twist on the Hanukka` legend and features the Maccabees in their life or death struggle against their Greek oppressors...

The story begins about 200 years before the Common Era. The Jews of Moadim found themselves in dire straits as King Antiochus began an assimilation program designed to separate the Jews from their culture, tradition and religious observance. We know what happened next. The Maccabees rose up in rebellion against him. But as the war dragged on and the Jews were faced with heavy losses, the Maccabees made an important decision – one that, until recently, was lost to Jewish history.

In desperation these Jews decided to form scouting parties that set sail from Judea into the Mediterranean Sea in search of mercenary soldiers to help their cause. As their tiny craft drifted farther into unfamiliar waters, they saw what we recognize today as the “toe” of the Italian “boot.” Then, as the Jews aboard viewed a beautiful mist rising above miles of pristine Calabrian coastline, in Hebrew they exclaimed, “*Eee-Tal-Ya.*”

What does this mean? “*Eee*” (spelled with the letters *alef* and *yud*) is the Hebrew for “island.” “*Tal*” is the Hebrew word for “dew” and “*ya*” is a contracted form of one of the names of God. “*Ee-tal-ya,*” or “Italia,” which means “the island of God’s dew.”

Today there are several prominent historians whose documentation of ancient texts lead them to conclude that there is more than a grain of truth to this story –that these Jews, in their exuberance at finding a beautiful new land, exclaimed, “*Eee- Tal- Ya,*” and gave Italy its name.

Whether or not we actually named this country, the Jews liked what they saw and stayed. We southern Italian Jews are the oldest Jews in the Diaspora and the only Jews in the world who settled voluntarily in a new land. Our ancestors created communities, like the ancient settlement at Bova Marina (in the deep south of the Italian peninsula) and later on we moved up through the “instep” of the “boot” as we built synagogues, schools and cemeteries, some of which are identified within “*Giudecca*” or Jewish neighborhoods, and still exist today.

So as we kindle our Hanukka` lights, we Jews can share a slice of pizza or a plate of pasta in honor of our Italian Jewish ancestors, our “*parenti*”- the courageous and irrepressible Maccabees who navigated (without GPS!), and stumbled upon one of the most beautiful places on earth, Bella :*Eee-Tal-Ya*”, Italy, “The Island of God’s Dew,”