

# “Cavalluccio” – After liberal Jewish movement puts In ten years work, Orthodox rabbis “discover” Italian B’nei Anousim!

BARBARA AIELLO February 4, 2013, 6:47 am  
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Rabbi Barbara Aiello is the first woman and first non-orthodox rabbi in Italy... [\[More\]](#)  
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Charles Caleb Cotton said it first. “Imitation is the highest form of flattery.” But it is the orthodox who have come to the deep south of Italy who put Cotton’s words into action. The B’nei Anousim movement in Calabria and Sicily that they describe as a “new” initiative actually began ten years ago and has grown each year since. As rabbi for two B’nei Anousim communities and founder of Italy’s B’nei Anousim movement, we have an exciting story to tell – a story which encompasses our hard work and those who have attempted to usurp our efforts and call them their own.

The date was **December 5, 2004** and I found myself in a place not often frequented by a Jewish rabbi – the salon of a Catholic Church. I had just concluded a lecture on the lost Jews of Sicily and Calabria when a young woman pushed her way forward, through the crowd that had gathered around me.

Monsignor Natale Colafati, who was now directing this animated group of Calabresi to a side room, provided the impetus for this historic meeting. Opening the Calabrian church to my lecture “*La Judeka di Nicastro e la Storia degli Ebrei*,” (The Jewish Quarter of Nicastro and the History of the Jews) the monsignor introduced my presentation by reminding the

audience of more than 100 Calabresi how important it is to understand one's history. To my right on the dais sat a renowned professor, Vincenzo Villella, whose book about the Jews of Nicastro was one of only a very few volumes that acknowledged the ancient historical presence of the Jews in Calabria.

Even though my "lingua italiana" left much to be desired, the audience sat in rapt attention, completely absorbed by my family story. When the lecture concluded, I was stunned by the number of local Calabresi who wanted to know more. That's when the young woman demanded my attention. She grabbed my hand and whispered, "I have always felt Jewish but no ever believed that our family could be Jewish. Please help me."

Her name was Antonella and when she told me her surname, I recognized at once as one of many surnames listed in the Inquisition records that I had uncovered that indicated Jewish ancestry. Pressing Antonella's hand between my own, I promised her that I would help her. It was that promise that formed the basis of what was to become a ten year study of the thriving Jewish population that once graced hundreds of Calabrian villages and towns and a personal mission to serve those who wanted to know more.

As the first woman and first modern liberal rabbi in Italy, I had returned to Calabria, the land of my roots where I had organized what was to become the first and only initiative to help southern Italians discover and embrace something that had been hidden from them for nearly 500 years. I had come to help them find their Jewish roots.

In Hebrew we say, "B'nei Anousim," a phrase that means "the children of the forced ones." Forced? How? More than 500 years ago, during the time of the Inquisition our ancestors were forced to do one of two things; we were forced either to abandon our Jewish religion and submit to forced conversion, or we were expelled from our homes and villages.

As a "Bat Anousim" (daughter of the forced ones), I have personal experience with this tragedy. My own ancestors, Spanish Jews, were forced to flee Toledo, Spain, then to Portugal, then to Sicily and finally to the mountains of Calabria to escape persecution, arrest or death. In fact, my great grandmother, Angela Rosa Grande was a direct descendant of Matheo de Grande, a "neofite" or "New Christian, whose property and goods were confiscated by the Inquisition authorities in the Sicilian town of Naro. The family was arrested for "judaizing," or practicing their Jewish traditions in secret. Finally settling in the

Reventino, in the tiny mountain village they called Serrastretta, my ancestors found a place to be Jewish, but given their frightening experiences, they chose to continue their clandestine observance. For centuries they lit candles on Friday evening, abstained from eating pork and, when a loved one died, they sat on low chairs and covered the mirrors throughout the house, ancient Jewish traditions they practiced up to this day.

On **November 10, 2005** – *Associazione per la ricerca e lo studio sugli Ebrei in Calabria e Sicilia*, (The Association for the research and study of the Jews of Calabria and Sicily) was born. Officers Domenick Porto, historian Vincenzo Villella and demographer Enrico Mascaro spearheaded the effort and pledged to organize events to promote the Jewish history and traditions of the southern Italy, a promise they keep to this day.

**Thanks to a grant in 2006** by the Vuolo Bernstein Foundation, a philanthropic group that supports Italian Jewish heritage, we were able to expand our efforts to include lectures, workshops and classes for Calabrians who were curious about their family's Jewish roots and to continue our work to connect Calabrians and Sicilians with their lost Jewish traditions in an effort that has become a ten year labor of love.

Specifically the History of the B'nei Anousim Movement in Calabria and Sicily is as follows:

**2003** Intense research begins in Calabria and Sicily as stories of Jewish family traditions emerge from southern Italians in villages scattered throughout the "Meridionale."

**2004** Calabria - Lamezia Terme – Rabbi Barbara Aiello, first liberal rabbi in Italy, delivers the first B'nei Anousim lecture, "La Judeka di Nicrasto e la Storia degli Ebrei," (The Jewish Quarter of Nicastro and the History of the Jews)

**2005** Calabria, Lamezia Terme– *Associazione per la ricerca e lo studio sugli Ebrei in Calabria e Sicilia*, (The Association for the research and study of the Jews of Calabria and Sicily) is registered with the Italian government.

**2005** Piano Battaglia, Sicily and Serrastretta, Calabria – the liberal movement leads the first public Passover seders in 500 years

**2005** Bova Marina, Calabria – Liberal movement's researchers visit the ancient synagogue excavation and initiate a campaign to publicize this remarkable find.

**2006** The Vuolo Bernstein Foundation provides seed money to fund the B'nei Anousim movement.

**2006** Dedication of synagogue Ner Tamid del Sud ("The Eternal Light of the South"), sometimes called "The Calabria Synagogue, the first active synagogue in Calabria in 500 years since Inquisition times.

**2006** American anousim couple, Andy and Lupe are married in a Jewish ceremony at the ruins of the castle of King Frederick II. The castle overlooks "Timpone" an ancient Jewish Quarter where Jews were offered protection from persecution. In this historic ceremony, the first Jewish wedding in 500 years, local Italian B'nei Anousim held the chuppah high above the bride and groom.

**2007** Synagogue Ner Tamid del Sud, The Calabrian Synagogue, hosts the first Bar Mitzvah in Calabria in 500 years. First of three kosher Torah scrolls is presented to the congregation.

**2007** In Selinunte, Sicily anousim celebrate Passover with the ancient "Seder Hamishi," a historic meal with prayers and blessings, held on the fifth night of Passover. The Seder Hamishi commemorates the secret meal hosted by Sicilian Christians who opened their homes to local Jews on the fifth night of Passover so that their Jewish neighbors could celebrate undetected by Inquisition authorities.

**2007** The Calabria Synagogue hosts the first ever Shabbaton study weekend for B'nei Anousim to study the Hebrew language, kosher traditions and Jewish belief and practice.

**2007** At the first public celebration of Chanukah in Calabria in 500 years, Rabbi Aiello instructs 45 B'nei Anousim on the lighting of the Chanukah candles.

**2008** Calabria, Cosenza, Ferramonti Deportation Camp – meetings and lectures to increase awareness of the role of the Italian soldiers and local citizens in saving more than 3,000 Jews.

**2008** The Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria (The IjCCC, the American arm of the Italian Anousim Research Society) hosts the first Italian Jewish Roots Conference.

**2009** The Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria (IjCCC) hosts the second Italian Jewish Roots Conference featuring Rabbi Aiello, professor Enrico Tromba from the Bova Marina excavation and Jewish DNA expert, Bennett Greenspan. More than 100 attendees gather to learn how to discover and embrace their lost Jewish roots.

**2010** Rabbi Aiello is commencement speaker at the American University at Rome to present her work as founder of the B'nei Anousim movement in Calabria and Sicily

**2010** The Calabria Synagogue welcomes the first Bat Mitzvah in Calabria who becomes the first girl in Calabrian history to read directly from the Torah scroll

**2011** -In Palermo, Sicily, Rabbi Aiello officiates at the Bar Mitzvah of lay leader Salvo Parrucca – first anousim and first public Bar Mitzvah ceremony in 500 years

**2012** Rabbi Aiello's pioneering work with B'nei anousim is featured in the Canadian documentary, "The Secret of San Nicandro."

**2012** The IjCCC delivers a Torah scroll to Chavurah Ner Tamid Palermo, the first modern liberal congregation in Sicily.

**2012** Ner Tamid del Sud community member Alessandro Yosef becomes the first anousim student to become Bar Mitzvah in Calabria.

**2012** The orthodox "discover" the B'nei Anousim of Calabria and Sicily

**2013** Rabbi Barbara Aiello and the B'nei Anousim Calabria community are recognized at the International Holocaust Memorial Day, hosted by the Italian Consulate on January 27, 2013 in Tampa, Florida.

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Throughout our ten year journey, our cultural center and synagogue has organized Shabbat services, festival celebrations, lectures, workshops and individual studies designed to illuminate the path for lost and isolated Jews of southern Italy who long to find and learn about their lost Jewish heritage.

For nearly a decade the synagogue and cultural center have been central to the liberal movement that offers a pluralistic approach to Jewish belief and practice. For years now we have extended the hand of Jewish welcome to all those whose personal history propels them to our door.

We are egalitarian in that we offer the opportunity to all women to participate equally in the services and festivals. We do not separate women from men and any woman who desires to do so may touch, carry or read directly from the Torah scroll.

We open our hearts to interfaith families in that we do not force the non-Jewish partner to make conversion – our personal histories that date back to Inquisition times affirm that forced conversions are always problematic and never appropriate.

We accept as Jewish the children of Jewish fathers as well as Jewish mothers and we welcome gay and lesbian individuals, couples and their children who can live openly as both gay and Jewish.

Interestingly enough, in less than one year traditional rabbis, along with an Israeli based organization have come to Calabria and Sicily to “discover” the anousim. In news articles and televised interviews my orthodox colleagues breathlessly relate how they have just now found these lost Jews.

In Italian we have a word for this. It’s called “Cavallaccio,” which in English, means “piggy back.” After ten years of dogged effort by the liberal Jewish movement, my “Cavallaccio” orthodox colleagues have given us a high compliment by attempting to co-opt those efforts and pass them off as their own.

Yet our mission remains the same. We will continue on our path to celebrate the deep Jewish roots of Calabria and Sicily’s B’nei Anousim. In addition we will offer the traditional rabbis and Jewish community leaders who have descended upon us from outside Calabria and Sicily and who attempt to establish themselves as the only point of authentic anousim reference – we will offer those who “giocano cavallaccio,” (who play piggy-back) the opportunity to share in our knowledge, our culture and our experience that, in ten years, is credible, extensive and not to be ignored.

