

Rediscovering Jewish roots

by Toby Tabachnick

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Back in the 1950s, when Barbara Aiello was growing up in the Hill District, Dormont and Beachview, and attending Catholic school, no one could have guessed what the future would hold for the dark-haired girl from a large Italian clan, the first in her family to be born in the United States.

Now, in her 60s, she is a self-described “pioneer,” the first woman rabbi to serve as a spiritual leader in Italy, as well as that country’s first non-Orthodox rabbi.

Aiello comes from a family of anousim (Italians whose ancestors were forced into conversion from Judaism), and has made it her mission to help other Italians re-connect with long lost Jewish roots.

“I was raised to know I was Jewish from both (mother’s and father’s) sides,” Aiello told the Chronicle, speaking from the Kobernick House, an assisted living center in Sarasota, Fla., where Aiello serves as spiritual leader for senior citizens during the winter months.

But, growing up in Pittsburgh, her family was secular, and what remained of its Jewish heritage had been reduced to a handful of customs.

Aiello’s family came from southern Italy, where a once strong Jewish presence had been practically obliterated during the Inquisition.

Still, Aiello knew telling facts about her family's heritage:

- Her great-grandfather had been called “rav,” and led prayer services in Calabria.
- Her father, Antonio, studied Bible and Torah while growing up in Italy, but never celebrated his bar mitzva.
- Her grandmother literally took her Judaism underground, lighting candles in the basement on Friday nights, even after immigrating to America.
- Aiello's mother also lit candles on Friday nights, but, at the time, Aiello believed it was just a family custom, rather than a Jewish rite.

“Anyone who came to America from Europe in the 1920s, or '30s, or '40s, was coming from a climate of tremendous fear,” Aiello said. “My father told me there were boys on the boat coming over to America who were throwing their tefillin overboard, saying, ‘No one will hurt us again.’”

Although her family knew of its Jewish heritage, her parents were reluctant to openly participate in the Pittsburgh Jewish community.

“I have the feeling my father felt embarrassed and afraid to move into the larger Jewish community,” Aiello said. But he nevertheless felt connected to the Jewish people, particularly after returning from service during World War II. Having served as one of the liberators of Buchenwald, he told his daughter to “try to do something for Jewish children.”

But it wasn't until 1978, after the birth of Aiello's daughter, that she really began to get involved with the religion of her ancestors.

She became a member of Temple Michah in Washington, D.C., where she was then living, and from there, moved to St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, where she started a religious school at the “oldest synagogue in continuous use under the American flag,” she said.

After becoming a lay leader in St. Thomas, she found the inspiration to continue her journey, eventually going on to study to become a rabbi. She was ordained at the age of 51 by the Rabbinical Seminary International and the Rabbinical Academy in New York City.

Soon after her ordination, Aiello returned to Italy to help uncover the Judaism buried there for so long.

Going from city to city in southern Italy, she found that, as in her own family, many Italians were practicing Jewish customs — covering mirrors, eating hard-boiled eggs after a funeral, cooking food on Friday afternoon for lunch on Saturday — even if they did not know the origins of those customs.

“Going back to Italy, and making a connection with Calabria, taught me about who our family

was, and what we lost,” Aiello said.

She founded the Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria, to help other Italians research their Jewish roots. She is also the spiritual leader of Sinagoga Ner Tamid del Sud, a synagogue where Italian anousim, as well as interfaith families, can find acceptance as they learn about their Jewish heritage.

Her synagogue is the first in Calabria in 500 years.

While Aiello is helping Italians living in Italy reconnect with their Jewish heritage, she is also helping many Italian-Americans do the same. She believes that a large percentage of Italian-Americans have Jewish ancestry.

“Five hundred years ago, about 40 percent of Sicilians and Calabrians were Jewish,” she said. “There are 26 million Italian Americans in the United States. Eighty percent of those came from the south of Italy — the poorest part, where immigration took place. The chances of Italian Americans having Jewish roots is therefore higher than for Italians living in Italy.”

Fran Brown, whose maiden name is Vito, came across Aiello five years ago, when Brown was researching her family history.

“We were Catholic,” said Brown, speaking from her home on Long Island. “But the church was not a big thing for us. My grandfather would not set foot in a church.”

“We had all these family customs, and we didn’t know where they came from,” she continued. “When someone died in Italy, my grandmother would cover the TV screens and mirrors. And there were all these superstitions to not bring on the evil eye. When sweeping the floor, my grandmother would sweep the dirt to the middle of the floor; she couldn’t sweep it out the door. And we never had a crucifix in the house. My grandmother said it was bad luck.”

According to stories passed down by her grandmother, Brown’s great-grandmother would light candles once a week, turning the statues of the saints in the house so that they were facing away from the candles.

When Brown finally met Aiello in New York City two years ago, and told her that her family name was Vito, as well as the name of the town in Calabria from which her family came, the rabbi confirmed what Brown had suspected: her family’s roots were Jewish.

Brown, who has been married to a Jewish man for 30 years, and whose son just celebrated his bar mitzva, said she and other relatives have since undergone DNA testing, which matched up to the DNA of the crypto-Jews from the Spanish island of Ibiza, located just across the map from the town of Tropea, where the Vitos eventually settled.

She said Aiello was a great help in her efforts to reconnect with her family history.

“She has verified things for me,” Brown said. “She has directed me where to go to find

evidence.”

Aiello helps Italians trace their Jewish roots by searching Inquisition records, and cross-checking surnames to see which are on record as families that were persecuted or killed.

“I feel I have a real mission,” she said, “especially these days and times when our numbers are declining. I believe if Jewish groups around the world would ease the path, and open the door, we would see an influx of people who so want to be Jewish, if we just give them the opportunity.

“My job is to keep the door open,” she continued. “I grew up with people saying, ‘You’re Italian; you can’t be Jewish.’ ”

The Orthodox movement, which is the predominate Jewish presence in Italy, does not recognize anousim as Jews, Aiello said, because most cannot prove they have the requisite four Jewish grandparents. Aiello established her pluralistic synagogue to provide an avenue to Judaism to those seeking it, but who cannot satisfy the Orthodox standards.

Some Orthodox Italians have criticized her, but she is not deterred.

“I have had some nice conversations with some Orthodox rabbis in Italy, but they cannot acknowledge me or call me a rabbi,” she said.

“The way I look at all of this is the Torah can unite us. There were no denominations in Torah times. Labels are for jelly jars, not Jews. We are under siege again in this world, and we need to stand together. We have to be mishpucha again.”

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