



IFR News Shevat 5766

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Jewish History Today, with Its Question Mark

Rabbi David Rabeeya

By Dr. David Rabeeya, Ph.D.

Statistical data cannot decide if one should be realistic or optimistic in his or her approach to life. They are there to describe facts on the ground and sometimes to demonstrate possible trends in future developments. It is also true that statistical data can be easily manipulated by establishing specific indicators in advance in order to reach the desirable results based on political considerations. Nevertheless, no one can doubt the decreasing number of American Jews and the increasing number of Muslims in the United States. It is doubtful if, at the present, more than five million identify themselves as Jews. This qualification may be needed since some American Jews wish to keep their Jewish identity but they prefer to hide it for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, the majority of American Jews do not belong to any synagogue, temple, or any political or social organization. It is not an exaggeration to state that their interest in the destiny of Israel is either negligible or marginal. While acculturation and assimilation are sometimes needed to pursue the illusive and the real American dream, the final result is that the majority of American Jews are not producing many Jewish children in order to ensure their survival in the future with its many radical changes, in the world at large, and in Israel in particular.

For many young American Jews, the tragic events of the Holocaust ceased to be a factor in their identity and they are

seeking new ways to preserve their proud heritage. Indeed, many established synagogues are failing to attract these youth to their door. These young people do not live in a vacuum and the secular American world, with its financial promises of success is always in their dominant reality. The traditional conduct of the synagogue cannot appeal to them anymore.

The rise of radical Islam, in many places in the world, is now adding even more anxieties and fears for Jewish who find themselves once again targets of intensive and brutal antisemitic and anti-Zionist propaganda. It seems to them that in Jewish history, there is always a question mark about the future, without a question mark to assure them of their security in the physical and psychological realms.

While most American Jews needed to be alarmed by radical cultural and demographic changes in America, no one can doubt anymore that new ethnic and religious groups are gaining new political power based on their legitimate participation in American democracy. The rise of the Hispanic political influence in internal and external American policies, together with the projection of new political strength by American Muslims, can offer ample opportunities for American Jews to form new political coalitions in the days to come. In addition, new strategies in the building of new coalitions with the raising power of the African-American population and leaders must also be on the agenda of American Jewry. New economic and political forces in the United States cannot be

IFR Mission Statement

The IFR is a professional organization of rabbis united by a commitment to Jewish tradition and a desire to facilitate the Jewish spiritual growth and life cycle needs of all.

IFR provides a progressive, pluralistic forum, linking member rabbis in a spirit of friendship and a sense of community.

IFR provides support for members in their professional endeavors and offers continuing education. IFR encourages professional relationships with rabbis and other rabbinic organizations.

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ignored anymore in order to secure the continuous support for Israel, which is being slowly delegitimized as a state by many forces in the intellectual communities as well as in some churches and Christian social organizations. There is also a need now to reevaluate the traditional loyalty of many Jews to the Democratic party of the past must be reexamined in order to seek influences in the new centers of political power. In other words, voting and acting on behalf of the Republican party must not be seen as negligence of liberal and progressive values but as a way to bring these core social commitments to the two political establishments in America. There is also an urgent need to reevaluate the often elusive Jewish education in America by honestly discussing the old formula of Bar and Bat Mitzvah preparations. People who are constantly decreasing in numbers, without professionalism in their Jewish education, may survive but they cannot live a Jewish life without altering the financial priorities making real Jewish education, serious and real. I doubt if the messiah will ever come, but it is my conviction that it is time to do something ourselves to live and perpetuate our dear Jewish heritage. We do not face only question marks!

After 500 years, Passover returns to southern Italy

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello

This article first appeared Venice Gondolier Sun (FL)

When the long arm of Chief Inquisitor Torquemada reached into Southern Italy, humiliating, torturing and killing the thousands of the Jews who had already fled similar persecutions in Spain, finding any Jews in Sicily or Calabria would be nothing short of a miracle. But miracles are things that we Jews have experienced over and over again throughout our history. Pesach 5765 was no exception. Maybe it wasn't as dramatic as the parting of the Sea of Reeds, but it seemed so. After 500 years, Passover seders returned to Sicily and Calabria.

Organized in Milan by the members singoga Lev Chadash, the first Progressive (Reform) synagogue in Italy and led by me, the first Progressive and first woman rabbi in Italy, the seder experience proved to be a fascinating combination of ancient Sephardic traditions shared by people who joyfully celebrated the rebirth of their Jewish roots.

Monday evening, April 25, 2005, is Italian Independence Day, and what better way to honor the ideals of freedom and unity than to welcome Jews and friends of the Jewish community to Sicily's Passover seder. Held high on a mountain at a restaurant in the small village of Piano Battaglia, tables were set with traditional seder plates, along with the "Haggadah," or traditional story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt, and, of course, baskets of unleavened bread called matzah.

Older members of the Jewish communities of Palermo and Messina delighted in seder symbols they had heard about as children. In addition to the shankbone at the leader's table, individual seder plates use the "bietola," (blood-red beet) to symbolize the lamb's blood on the doorposts that saved the firstborn in Jewish families. There were other examples of Sephardic Jewish influence, which differs from what is generally found at the American Ashkenazic seder table. Romaine lettuce (more bitter than the American variety) replaced horseradish as a symbolic reminder of the bitterness of slavery. Pieces of celery stalk, rather than parsley, serve as "karpas," or greens, dipped in vinegar, rather than saltwater, both symbolizing the tears shed by our people. The traditional egg on the Italian seder plate is a rich brown in color because it has been roasted for hours with onion skins, vinegar and saffron.

The seder meal begins with a "primo piatto" of rice steamed with vegetables, because, in the Sephardic tradition, rice as well as other legumes are considered kosher for Pesach. Roasted lamb is a must along with "mina," a layered lasagna-type meat and matzah pie.

As rabbi and service leader, it was Four Cups, For Questions, Four Sons and Four Seders, the last of which was held in Serrastretta, the small Calabrian village where my father, Antonio Aiello (of blessed memory) spent his childhood. Two buses, "Pullman" as they are called by the locals, brought Calabrian Jews from as far away as the villages of Palmi and Goia Tauro. Here, at the beautiful restaurant at Parco Pingitore, an interfaith group including not only Jewish families, but Catholic and Protestant church members, joined in the seder celebration.

Pesach traditions, Italian-style, continued with the passing of the matzah plate shoulder to shoulder among the guests, a symbol of the heavy burden of slavery. The singing of the traditional Dayenu included "whips" of green onions, used to mimic the beating of the Jewish slaves. Pentecostal choir members demonstrated their gratitude and their love for Israel, by singing a beautiful selection of Jewish melodies, all in Hebrew.

Thanks to dedication and generosity of my local Jewish community, I was able to pack a giant suitcase filled with more than a dozen boxes of matzah. For some Jewish families, who trace their roots back to Jewish grandparents or great grandparents, the Milanese matzah was their first taste of this traditional Passover staple. Following the seder, there was enough matzah to give to individual families so they could continue the tradition by keeping kosher for Pesach in their own homes. For most of these families, it was their first opportunity to obtain "local" kosher food.

Journalists from local newspapers and a crew from RAI 3 Italian TV, documented the festivities. News articles that appeared several days before the seder included an interview with Professor Vincenzo Vilella, author of a new and extremely important book for Italian Jews. "La Judeca di Nicastro, e la storia degli Ebrei in Calabria" (The Jews of Nicastro and the history of the Jews in Calabria), recounts the history of many Jewish families, my own ancestors among them, and emphasizes the little known and

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less appreciated fact that, prior to the Inquisition, more than 40 percent of the entire populations of Sicily and Calabria were Jewish. Professor Villella also included an exhaustive list of Italian-Jewish surnames, along with ideas for discovering and documenting an Italian Jewish family tree.

As I stood before the 62 Calabrian participants, I found myself whispering a prayer of gratitude for what was the most emotional experience in my rabbinic career. Recalling my own family's history, I was able say, "When my Nonna carried candles to the cellar to kindle the lights of Shabbat, I realized that fear and prejudice nearly extinguished our heritage.

This year, in Calabria and in Sicily, we Jews who were nearly robbed of our religion and our traditions, brought the light of Pesach out of the cantina and into the hearts of fellow Jews, who, after 500 years, now have a new opportunity to do as Torah commands and be "a light unto the nations."

The seder concludes with the traditional wish, when we say, "Next year in Jerusalem." For me and for the nearly 100 returning Jews who shared Passover together, we add, "Next year in Sicily," and "Next year in Calabria," too.

Rabbi Barbara Aiello is the rabbi of sinagoga Lev Chadash, in Milan, the first Progressive synagogue in Italy.

For more information, visit rabbibarbara.com or write to her at rabbi@rabbibarbara.com

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IFR Board meeting minutes can be viewed on the IFR web site www.intfedrabbis.org

Enter the protected portion and click on the IFR Board minutes located on the menu on the left side.

IFR News Editor

Rabbi Suzanne H. Carter

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IFR DUES 2005-2006

Now is the time to renew your membership in the IFR. Please make your check for \$150.00 payable to:

The International Federation of Rabbs

You may also pay your dues in two payments, \$75.00 now and a postdated check for \$75.00

Send your check (s) to the IFR treasurer

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IFR Rabbis News & Shmooze



IFR rabbi in Augusta Ga, Rabbi David Sirull and his wife Stacy on the birth of their third child, Sidney Isaac Sirull born June 21, 2005.

Bruchim Ha'Baim to new IFR members

Rabbi Arthur Rosenberg

Rabbi Dr. Raphael Pazo Jr. Ph.D.

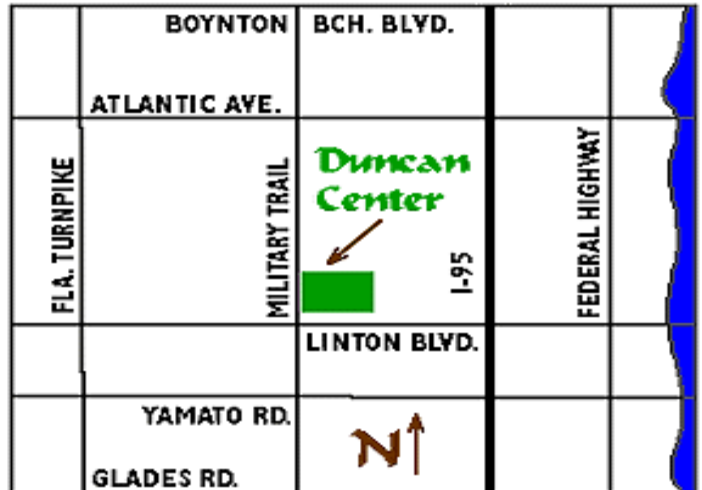
Rabbi Dr. Harris Brody

Rabbi Anne White

It's official!

IFR Conference will be Tuesday April 4-Thursday April 6 2006 in sunny Delray Beach, Florida

Lets see how we have all "changed" and grown since 2000 & 2001! (photos below)



IFR Conference 2001 Duncan Center-Delray Beach



IFR Conference 2000 Duncan Center-Delray Beach FL.

Finding the Ideas of Forgiveness with the Act of Giving

Rabbi Jeffrey Lipschultz

The month of August has left us and for many it is the end of summer lightheartedness. We put away our summer clothes and file away our summer memories and begin thinking about the important elements of the New Year which will be coming shortly. As we enter September we begin preparations for the new ideas within the shift from easy going life of summer to the seriousness of the coming year. We do this by putting our minds into the mode of forgiveness. We establish this by saying the *slichot* prayer which begins on September 24th when our minds and hearts try to cling to the ideas of forgiveness and hope for a change in heart as we prepare for Rosh HaShannah.

Slichot prepares our mind and soul for the inspiration and initiative to change so we can stand with God on Rosh HaShannah. The change comes from hope and also actions of our relationships to one another. On *Slichot* we recite the beginning of the High Holiday liturgy and look to the words we recite in hope that it can prepare us for judgment. The prayers signal for us to search within our heart and give of ourselves not only to God, but to our fellow human beings searching for our inner quality of forgiveness.

On September 24th we begin the liturgy of the High Holy Days in which we search introspectively within our daily actions at our relationships to others. On both on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur there is a prayer which concludes, "Repentance, prayer, and charity or *tzedakah* may avert the evil decree."

Our tradition teaches that *tzedakah* has a significant impact. The Talmud in Yurasalmi Peah tells us that *tzedakah* is the equal of all of the commandments of the Torah combined. That is a strong statement if one looks at all the laws, including the ones relating to God and man; it is the charity of man to man that seems to outlast everything. All seems to come down to the word *tzedakah*, the Jewish concept of giving.

In trying to understand *tzedakah* one needs to search in our textual history for the meaning of giving and receiving for love and forgiveness. We find that the book of Deuteronomy states, "If there be a needy person among you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand." The Hebrew begins with "*patoach tiftach*", you shall "open, open" your hand.



קול הנשיאה

Kol Hanisiya

Rabbi Suzanne H. Carter

הרבנית שושנה רחל בת מאיר הישראלית

Shalom Chevrei IFR,

This is my second year as president of the IFR, and am very pleased to be part of this expanding group of wonderful men and women.

We will be having our 5th IFR Conference since the year 2000 on April 4-6 2006. The conference this year is in South Florida (third time) at The Duncan Center in my hometown of Delray Beach.

I encourage all of you to make an attempt to be with us. Delray Beach is a beautiful quaint village by the sea, which reminds me of Natanya Israel, where I lived during the 1970's.

Delray Beach is within 30 miles of Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach airports.

The Duncan Center is approximately 3-4 miles from the beach and is run by the Episcopal Dioceses, their Chef John, made a point of serving all vegetarian meals, and at our next conference, we will give our attendees an option for Kosher meals or vegetarian.

During the conference the IFR Board will meet and there will be an election for new officers and Board members. Nominations for new officers and Board members will be opened up to the IFR membership in late January 2006, which will give all IFR members an opportunity to nominate a new board.

Those of you who will be attending and would like to make a presentation or lead a workshop, please contact me at rabbis@bellsouth.net or call me at 561-498-4020.

I am looking forward to meeting many of you "panim el panim".

Kol Tuv

shosh

Finding the Ideas of Forgiveness with the Act of Giving

Rabbi Jeffrey Lipschultz

The verse continues with “*naton, titayn*” you shall “give, give” saying it twice and “your heart shall not be grieved”. Opening your hand means giving from all elements of yourself, not just money but your time, even a kind word. The term is also said twice so we will give and not turn away from the opportunity to allow others to give to us.

Tzedakah is more than just giving, it is a state of mind that we put ourselves into in order to prepare for standing before God. When we approach God during the holidays we appear as a humble individual, a person pleading for justice and righteousness, but we are not always humble when we relate to others. We need to recognize our relationships with others as we prepare our hearts for the prayers of Slichot. We pray not asking for something for nothing but for a second chance, the ability to make our world and our souls better simply through our self-motivation of giving to individuals and our community. We want to change ourselves as well as the person who is affected from our gifts through the act of giving; this is how we understand the gifts that God has bestowed upon us. We allow the giving to act as a catalyst for forgiveness.

Tzedakah is rooted in a basic Jewish principle that all people are responsible for each other. We are obligated to share our physical possessions with those who are in need and we need to be proud of these actions when doing it. The righteousness of charity comes not from how much we give but the simple idea that giving is our responsibility. The notion that we are connected through our actions is what binds us as a community. We are to change our hearts when we give and thus the giver is truly the one who benefits from this action. The giver is changed by the simple act of giving.

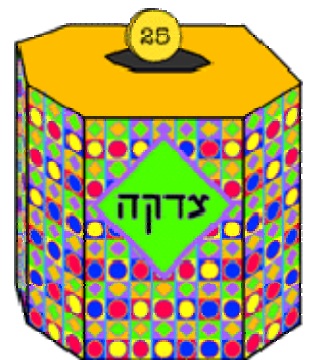
As we approach this month it is not a time for us to look at the world and say, “You are on your own, you should pull yourself out of your problems by your own will, don’t lean on me, work it out for yourself.” We should be saying that we are stronger when we are together, we lean on each other, and we are responsible for each other. That is why the prayer for *tzedakah* during the High Holidays is an essential element of our faith. We stand together because with one voice we stand with God and offer our supplication.

As we prepare to embrace God with our prayers for forgiveness we are given the opportunity to change. The acts of asking for forgiveness are to put our bodies into action and this is why giving is so important. When we embrace the love of God we see that the greatest gift that can be given is often the gift of forgiveness. Now is the time to give the *tzedakah* of forgiveness to those around us and try to start our lives with a new heart.

This year our New Year comes later than previous Rosh HaShannahs, so we have extra time to prepare our minds and hearts for the judgment of Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur. This unique month of September we are given this extra time to set aside old angers and make peace with old enemies and try and find our charity to finally forgive. On Slichot we ask God to forgive our mistakes but first we must forgive others.

This is the final act of *tzedakah* that we can give the world, a second chance for a relationship with us. We ask God to give us another year so we begin this by taking it upon ourselves to give others a new opportunity to come back into our lives. We come together as a community to pray, so let us do it out of love and not spite, let’s rebuild bridges that have fallen and build new relationships that seem distant from us. This is the greatest act of giving a person can do, rekindling a flame in someone that had appeared burnt out due to bad feelings.

Let us stand together and cling to God as Jews and human beings united through the act of giving. Take this time to connect with others and build and create something positive for the New Year.



Rabbi Jeffrey Lipschultz is the spiritual leader of Temple Beth Sholom in Chula Vista. He welcomes your thoughts at dvjewish@rof.net

The Jewish Spiritual Quest

Rabbi R. Zev Wellins, D.D.

They Seek and Fail

Today's Jews hunger for spirituality and are hoping that Judaism will be able to provide a framework that will give meaning and purpose to their lives. Some of them are reaching outside of Judaism only because when they reach inside, their own faith fails to provide what they need when they need it.

They expect a religion, any religion, to help them answer the "big questions" of life and death and the mysteries of existence, as well as to give them comfort in times of pain and distress. When they realize that something is missing in their lives, they turn to their rabbis for guidance on their spiritual quest or for counseling in developing a personal relationship with God. They turn to their congregation for help in welcoming them into a sense of community and for direction in filling the gap left by social isolation. Many of them come away from the experience empty handed and broken hearted.

They are often met in these attempts by what they perceive as disingenuousness, unresponsiveness, or ineffectiveness. This is not done intentionally, but rather comes as a result of impersonal and institutional style behavior practiced by rabbis, synagogue staff, and even other congregants. Thus, the process of alienation begins and these Jewish seekers become increasingly distanced from their God, their People, and their own Jewish identity.

Spiritual Judaism is at the Center

Rabbis are sorely distressed by this syndrome and suggest that it is one of the most damaging cancers to threaten the body of Judaism today. How do we treat the disease? How do we cause this "exodus" to go into remission? As Jewish leaders and teachers, we feel compelled to find a cure and to then put the remedy on the market for distribution to our spiritually suffering Jewish family.

Given the sum of the wisdom derived from our combined personal experiences, the encyclopedic knowledge gained from our teachers and texts, and

the collected understanding gleaned from the sechel (intuitive knowledge) gifted to us by our students, we urge the development of Centers for Spiritual Judaism to aid in the healing of our faith and of our people. We firmly believe that Judaism's new frontier lies in an exploration and evolution of Jewish spirituality. Spiritual Judaism is a dynamic force that will ultimately propel ongoing development in all areas of Jewish thinking.

The Search for Shalom

Seeking the "spiritual" meaning of a given ritual, custom, or belief is not a new idea in Judaism. It is one of the most pervasive elements in Jewish cultural history and has been part of the Jewish thought system since its origins. It is widespread in the Biblical and Talmudic commentaries, in the Midrashic legends and Aggadic folklore, as well as in the mystical teachings of Kabbalah.

Finding the path to enlightenment and achieving "mystical transcendence", linking one's finite self to the infinite and eternal, is a basic need of every human being. Spiritual Judaism seeks to revitalize and recapture the hearts, minds, and souls of disaffiliated Jews who have been too long without faith in their faith, without belief in their beliefs, and without inspiration in their spiritual search.

Jewish spiritual seekers want and need help in their quest. They must be taught how to use what we have called Spiritual Judaism. Those searching for a Jewish anchor in the secular world need assistance with their spiritual tools, such as personal prayer, meditation, imagery, and relaxation techniques.

This apparatus can in turn be used for self-discovery, spiritual development and transformation, and energy direction; the goal being to facilitate completeness in healing (refuah sh'leimah), which will thereby enable them to attain a wholeness (sh'leimut) of mind-body-spirit. With this completeness or wholeness comes a harmony of the energy of being, which we call shalom - peace.

When a believer turns to their spiritual support system in times of dire emotional need and they receive no succor, no comfort, no direction or hope – what

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The Jewish Spiritual Quest continued from page 8

good is it? It is bound to become alien to them and their hearts are no longer bound to it! We pray that Spiritual Judaism will endow these Jews with a system of practice and belief that will truly become a part of them. We hope that it will penetrate to the innermost reaches of their hearts, and afford them a deep wellspring of spiritual strength with which to face their journey in the world.



Dr. Wellins is staff Rabbi and Jewish Spiritual Counselor for Hospice Care of Southeast Florida, Rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami in Boca Raton and Executive Director of: The Center for Spiritual Judaism, based in Miami, Florida. You can reach him at: (305) 385-4353; email: rebzev@bellsouth.net.