

## **After 500 Years, Passover Returns to Southern Italy**

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello  
Sinagoga Lev Chadash, Milano Italy  
The First Progressive (Reform) Synagogue in Italy

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 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 Hebrew 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 salt water, 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 *Dayenu* included “whips” of green onions, used to mimic the beating of the Hebrew 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 that 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 television, documented the festivities. News articles that appeared several days before the seder included an interview with Professor Vincenzo Villella, 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 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 a 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: [www.rabbibarbara.com](http://www.rabbibarbara.com) or write to Rabbi Aiello at [rabbi@rabbibarbara.com](mailto:rabbi@rabbibarbara.com)

