

# The Jews of Sicily and Calabria

## *The Italian Anusim That Nobody Knows*

by Rabbi Barbara Aiello

Rabbi Barbara Aiello is the first woman rabbi and first non-orthodox rabbi in Italy, where she has served a progressive synagogue in Milan. She is currently rabbi of Ner Tamid del Sud, the first active synagogue in Calabria in 500 years. Rabbi Aiello has written extensively about her crypto-Jewish background and her efforts to uncover the hidden Jewish traditions of Calabrian Jews that date back to Inquisition times. Her work in the deep south of Italy and Sicily includes directing the Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria (IjCCC), an organization dedicated to the anusim of southern Italy to help them discover and embrace their Jewish roots.

*It is nearly 10 a.m. and as tour leader I'm relieved. We are on time! We've just arrived in the tiny port city of Bova Marina, not far from the "toe" of the Italian "boot." This part of Italy, the deep south, is nicknamed "Mezzogiorno" (an Italian word that means "mid-day) because here we have bright sunshine all year round.) Today, however, is an exception. It's raining. Yet that doesn't much matter because our little band of tourists, Jews who traveled from Texas, New York, New Jersey and even Israel are well protected. We are standing directly under the autostrada, the Italian super highway that snakes through Italy, north to south. But more important, we are standing on holy ground.*

*The yarzeit candle burns, and I lead the group first in the Mourner's Kaddish and then, along with Bova Marina's minister for cultural affairs, we motion to the three construction workers who watch us that it's fine if they come closer. They do and we all join hands and sing Oseh Shalom.*

*We have just held the Yizkor memorial service for the Jews who came before. For it is here, under a highway, that the remains of a synagogue were discovered. Second only to the ancient synagogue in Ostia, its northern sister, the synagogue at Bova Marina dates back to the fourth century CE and most important, it represents and verifies what I've always know—that we Calabrian Jews, the first Jews of the diaspora, have been in Italy for a very, very long time.*

The first thing one notices about Enrico Tromba is his height. Unlike the stereotype of Italian men that most Americans see, Enrico is quite tall. His shock of black hair flops low on his forehead and he brushes it back with one free hand, while in the other he dangles a cigarette. We've worked together for several years now taking small groups of tourists to Jewish sites in Calabria, so this may be why I feel I have the license to mother him into a discussion about smoking and quitting. Professor Tromba tells me that yes, he will quit soon, when he has made the decision to gather his energies and put them to the task.

“Because,” Enrico says, “when I am determined to do something, I do it.”

I believe him because Enrico Tromba has demonstrated an extraordinary will when it comes to an extraordinary project—the excavation of the ancient synagogue at Bova Marina that has captured his imagination, his dedication and almost all of his free time.

Born and raised in Reggio Calabria, Tromba became a historian and archaeologist specializing in the discovery and documentation of Jewish life and culture in Calabria. Currently a Professor of Jewish Antiquities at the Istituto Superiore di Scienze Religiose in Reggio Calabria, Tromba has published a comprehensive group of books and articles about Jewish life in Calabria and has led a team of archaeologists and volunteers to uncover what is one of the most important treasures of Jewish life in southern Italy. Thanks to his efforts, the site is no longer covered with discarded plastic sheeting held in place by fragments of ceramic tile. Today, this precious discovery is preserved and protected, while Tromba creatively finds and applies local, state and international funds to continue the dig and add a Jewish museum and modest conference hall as well.

Just what is so special about this site? Tromba will tell you (2007). In his most recent book, “Jewish Antiquities: The Jewish Evidences in the Area of Reggio” (2007) he states of Bova Marina, then known as Delia:

Delia represented an important urban settlement in the Roman period and it achieved its greatest expansion between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The finding of this synagogue, which is the second in Italy after Ostia [near Rome], became part of this environment...At first [when the government began to repair and enlarge the highway and people got their first glimpse of the walls of the synagogue] people believed these ruins belonged to one of several Roman villae situated by the Ionic sea coast of Reggio. But the mosaic flooring of a room had a surprise in store: the depiction of a [seven branched] Menorah. Every doubt was removed and the site was identified as a synagogue from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (pp. 29-30).

Now on display in a museum room of the “Commune,” or Town Hall, Bova Marina’s mayor delights in showing off his community’s find. The menorah and surrounding artistic representations, including designs that clearly depict a *shofar* and pomegranates have been carefully reconstructed. The *menorah* and surrounding pieces, which measure at least six feet by six feet in size, is, by any standard, enormous. The town fathers have even permitted Tromba to create an elaborate display that includes posters, drawings and commentary, all pertaining to the ancient Jewish communities that once dotted the entire “foot” of the Italian boot.

Shortly after the synagogue was found, Elio Toaff, Rome’s chief rabbi at that time and one of several authorities who verified its Jewish authenticity, told *The New York Times* that “This is a rare find of very great importance, and it is a complete surprise. No one had any idea a Jewish community existed there. We have only very limited information of any kind on Jewish life in southern Italy.” (Suro, 1986, p. A9)

Where did these Jews come from? When and for what reasons did they arrive, some on the island of Sicily and others to sail across the straits of Messina into Calabria? Historians, such as Milano (1963) interested in the Jewish presence here and unafraid of backlash from the Catholic Church, among others, think they know.

Nardo Bonomi is an internationally acclaimed Jewish genealogist who has discovered his own Jewish roots and helps other Italians to do the same. His website (2008) is filled with information about the Jews of Italy, including ways to find evidence of Jewish ancestry. His bibliography of the history of Italian Jews is vast, but even Bonomi himself admits that it has been only recently that historians have begun to admit to and then study what we now know is profound Calabrian Jewish presence.

### **What's in a name?**

It is the determined visitor who makes her/his way along a winding mountain road (*serpentina*, say the locals, which means “curving like a snake!”) to the 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 my father was raised and where Jews settled and practiced in secret for over four hundred years. Locals tell me that five Jewish families organized the village. Running from persecution in their near-by village of Scigliano, the families Bruni, Scalise, Aiello, Gallo and De Fazio hoped to continue a peaceful Jewish life in this isolated forest, 3,000 feet above Nicastro. Centuries later my own grandmother, Felicia Scalise, tried to maintain the remnant of Jewish practice that was passed on to her by her parents. Felicia's father, Saverio Scalise taught his daughter how to kill and *kasher* a chicken. Her mother, Angelarosa Grande insisted that her daughter understand and appreciate their Jewish heritage, especially since so many of the Grande family had been judged as judaizers and had their property confiscated by Inquisition authorities in their native Sicily, a fact that historian Francesco Renda (1993) documents in a book that lists, by name and town, the persecution of Sicilian Jews. Renda includes an account of the persecution of the Grande family (pp. 246, 271).

My father, Antonio Aiello, of blessed memory, would recall the early years of his crypto-Jewish family:

*When I was a boy here in the village, (Serrastretta) 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 in Nicastro. But that did not deter my mother. She found a farmer who routinely made the trip to market on Mondays and Thursdays. So, twice a week I sat atop the artichokes, or potatoes or broccoli while the farmer drove his load of produce in 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. He taught me the bible 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 passed along among Calabrian Jews for centuries. Legend has it that about 167 BCE, the Jews found themselves in dire straits. While King Antiochus was hell bent on separating the Jews from their culture, tradition and religion, the Maccabees rose up in rebellion against him. But as the war dragged on and the Jews were faced with heavy losses, they made an important decision. They formed scouting parties that sailed from Judea in search of mercenary soldiers to help their cause. As their tiny craft drifted farther into the sea, the Jews aboard viewed a beautiful mist rising above miles of pristine Calabrian coastline. In Hebrew they exclaimed, “*Aiee-tal-ya.*” “*Aiee*” is Hebrew for “coastline,” “*tal*” for “dew” and “*ya*” is a contracted form of one of the names of God (see psalm 68:4). “*Ee-tal-ya,*” or “*Italia,*” which means “the coastline of God’s dew.” There are historians even today who believe it might be true—that these Jews gave Italy its name (e.g., Foa, 2000, p. 108).

Whether or not we actually named this country, the Jews liked what they saw and stayed. They created communities with cemeteries, schools and synagogues like the one Tromba and his team found at Bova Marina. They prospered as traders, especially in silk and indigo dye, the craft that they developed and for which historians credit the Jews of Catanzaro, Cosenza and Crotona to this day.

Nardo Bonomo (2008) reports that Jews also arrived as slaves and he states that “Approximately eight thousand Jews lived in Rome during the reign of Emperor Augustus, and ‘some tens of thousands’ lived there under the reigns of Emperors Tiberius and Claudius. In the second half of the first century there were ten synagogues in Rome” (p. 2). Soon after, their numbers reached more than fifteen. During this period and continuing forward in subsequent centuries, historians document Jewish settlements in forty-three separate locations throughout the Italian peninsula, and in Sicily and Sardinia as well. These included Jewish communities in Rome, Genova, Milano, Bologna, Ravenna, Napoli, Pompei, Siracusa and Messina.

There were communities throughout southern Italy that survived during the darkest years of the Middle Ages. Twelfth century historians found flourishing communities throughout the south of Italy with scholars and teachers of wide renown, including Shabbatai Donnolo, an important physician of the period, and Iosef Vidal Calabro, whose translations of medical textbooks and documents from Arabic into Hebrew were used throughout the region. Indeed, the first printed and dated Hebrew book ever published with movable type came to life on the 1st of Adar 5235 or Feb 17, 1475. The book is a copy of Rashi's commentary on the Five Books of Moses. It was printed by Abraham ben Yitzhak ben Garton, amazingly enough in the city of Reggio di Calabria. Ashley Perry (Perez) (2008), in her article commemorating the anniversary of Garton's achievement, writes:

The method of type was called incunabula, which is a block book printed from a single carved or sculpted wooden block for each page, made with individual pieces of cast metal movable type on a printing press, in the technology made famous by Johannes Gutenberg. Relatively little is known of Garton, although most historians claim that he

was a Spanish Jew who had escaped to Italy because of the wave of anti-Jewish hatred asserting itself in the Iberian Peninsula (March 10, 2008).

Reggio di Calabria had become a haven for those Jews who fled Spain first because of the anti-Jewish violence and then the Spanish Inquisition that followed.

### **The Jews of Calabria and Their Link to Spain**

Historians Colafemmina (1989) and Milano (1963) were among a number of researchers who state that the Jews of Italy fall into one of four categories historically, a fact that has created confusion for Calabrians and Sicilians who are searching for evidence of their Jewish roots. The first group, the Jews of Israel, or "Italkim," are those who trace their ancestry to Rome. These include those brought by the Romans as slaves and the scouts who were hoping to hire mercenary soldiers to help the Macabbes in their fight against King Antiochius.

The second group, the Sephardim, is sometimes divided into two subgroups, the Spanish and Portuguese Jews who arrived in Italy after the expulsions from Spain in 1492, Portugal in 1497, and the Kingdom of Naples in 1533, and the Levantine Sephardim who in the 1500s received permission to live in selected areas, e.g., Florence and Ancona, because of the increased participation of Sephardim in trade with the Balkan countries. The remaining two groups include Ashkenazi Jews, who lived in northern Italy, and finally the Jews found near Asti who were expelled from France at different times during the Middle Ages.

Much has been written about the Jews of Spain and Portugal, their thriving communities throughout the Middle Ages and how the horrible turn of events brought about by the Expulsion Decree in 1492 and the Spanish Inquisition led to them being rounded up, tortured and burned publicly in the "act of faith," known as *auto da fe*. Head perpetrator, of what some in my own family refer to as the "First Holocaust," was none other than mass murderer Tomás de Torquemada (Kerrigan, 2001; Perez, 2002; Randall, 1996; Walsh, 1940 and Whitechapel, 2003).

Historian Beth Randall (1996) reports that, given a free hand by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, our henchman Torquemada published a set of official guidelines to help Catholics identify practicing Jews in their midst. Drawing on information from these historians (Kerrigan et al.), Randall shares Torquemada's personal formula for spotting and denouncing Jews, used with alarming effectiveness throughout Spain, Portugal and finally in Italy as well:

If you see that your neighbors are wearing clean and fancy clothes on Saturdays, they are Jews.

If they clean their houses on Fridays and light candles earlier than usual on that night, they are Jews.

If they eat unleavened bread and begin their meals with celery and lettuce during Holy Week, they are Jews.

If they say prayers facing a wall, bowing back and forth, they are Jews" (p.3).

Neighbor suspected neighbor, children spied on their relatives and sometimes they even accused their own parents. Maids, cooks and gardeners were paid a bounty for every Jew

they turned into the authorities. What follows is a personal account of the horrors written in Hebrew by an Italian Jew in April or May of 1495.

And in the [Hebrew] year 5252 (1492), in the days of King Ferdinand, the Lord visited the remnant of his people...and exiled them. After the king captured the city of Granada...he ordered the expulsion of all Jews in all parts of his kingdom [including] Castile, Catalonia, Aragon, Galicia, Majorca, Minorca, the Basque provinces, the islands of Sardinia and Sicily and the kingdom of Valencia. About their number there is no agreement, but after many inquiries, I found that the most generally accepted estimate is about 250,000 persons but some say more, maybe as many as 800,000 in all. The Jews were given three months to leave but in that time some endeavored to stay by giving their money, their land and their possessions to the King but as time went on they gave up all hope of remaining and sold everything they had for very small prices, to save themselves....120,000 of them went to Portugal but the King there acted much worse toward them than did the King of Spain. After six months had elapsed he made slaves of all those Jews who remained and banished 700 children (some say there were many more) to a remote island and all of them died.... Many ships with Jews, especially from Sicily went to Naples on the coast. The king of this country received them all but on account of their very large number, it was not enough [help]. Some Jews died of famine,...others sold their children to Christians to sustain their life. Other Jews were dispersed all throughout the countries of Italy....He who said unto His world, Enough, may He also say Enough unto our sufferings...(Marcus, 1938, pp. 51-5).

Although the expulsion from Spain began in 1492, the Inquisition that began shortly afterward survived for centuries until it was permanently annulled by formal decree on July 15, 1834. In addition, a step-child of the Spanish Inquisition was the one perpetrated in Rome. Established in 1542 by Pope Paul III, it was termed the Congregation of the Inquisition and its main objective was to stop the spread of Protestant sects into Italy. This Inquisition concerned itself with the “heretic Jew,” especially where Jewish writing was concerned. It was also this institution that put Galileo on trial for heresy. So historically speaking, Jews were squeezed from both sides; from Spain to the south and Rome to the north. So is it any wonder that historians would make the grave error of pronouncing the expulsions and inquisitions as having dealt the fatal blow to Judaism in Spain and Portugal, Sicily, Sardinia and Calabria?

Gianna Furci is now nearly 70 years old. As owner and operator of Lamezia Terme’s only modern hotel, Gianna is stylishly dressed, beautifully coiffed and very friendly. She has tales to tell of her family’s customs.

*I remember when I was a little girl and my great grandmother was still alive. We lived in Nicastro, in the old city center. It’s all called Lamezia Terme now, but back then it was Nicastro. Anyway, my bisnonna told me that even though our family always went to church, we only went because we had to. But when there was a wedding, we had this tradition to make a blessing “sotto la coperta” (under the cloth). You see, one of the women, like my great grandmother, would spend nearly a year crocheting a beautiful bedspread, big enough for the bride and groom’s double bed. But the first time anyone saw it was on the wedding day. Four men of the family would each take a corner and hold the “coperta” over the heads of the wedding couple. The two fathers would make a blessing in a secret language. Later on I learned that the blessing was in Hebrew, the language of the Jews.*

Thanks to Gianna and her sons, Jews from around the world wanting to see southern Italy through Jewish eyes or Italian Americans who have come to discover their Jewish roots, find a warm welcome at Albergo Savant. And it is here that historians Vincenzo Vilella and Enrico Mascaro meet to map out a strategy for documenting and publicizing the rich Jewish history of Calabria that has been ignored for so long. Professor Vilella, a journalist, magazine editor, published poet and professor of Italian history, speaks first. In Italian he tells us:

Rather than using only the word “expulsion,” I like to think of Jewish movement in that era as also a kind of forced emigration. The Jews were forced into a migration first from Spain to Portugal and from Spain to Italy. As the persecutions continued, they went from Sicily and Sardinia to southern and central Italy. This all happened between 1492 and 1541, when the Jews slowly were forced out of southern Italy and began to move north.

Mascaro continues as he recalls stories of his own crypto-Jewish background. He is a recently retired school superintendent, historian and archivist who has written extensively about the demographics of many of the tiny villages tucked deep in the Calabrian hills. His spirit is lively and his face animated as he tells his story. Speaking in Italian he says,

*I was born here in Calabria in 1941, during the height of the Fascist laws against the Italian Jews. Our surname, Mascaro, comes from Catalonia in Spain and I have been told that we descend from a line of famous rabbis. No one in my family, not my parents, grandparents or great grandparents, ever attended Church, something which in those days was a great departure from societal norms, where even daily activities centered around the parish. My grandfather was named Napoleone, a name that many Jews gave to their children because Napoleone granted equal rights to the Jews. When my grandmother lay dying, her wishes were that she should be buried the day after her death, that no priest should be called and that her body should be wrapped only in a sheet. Later on I found out that these were Jewish burial customs. When I was born I was an identical twin. The midwife who delivered the two of us was so afraid of the Nazis and their experiments on twins that she convinced my mother to register our births as Italian Catholic. So here I am, a man descended from a long line of crypto-Jews, holding a birth certificate that reads, “identical twin pure Aryan race.”*

Gianna Furci and Enrico Mascaro are only two of the many hundreds or maybe thousands of Calabrians whose personal histories include remnants of Jewish family traditions. Vincenzo Vilella, author of the most recent and comprehensive book written about the Jews of Calabria (2004), is determined to tell their stories and the stories of all those Calabrian Jews whose heritage was hidden, ignored and so cruelly stolen from them.

Vilella documents the story of the Jews of Timpone (the local Italian word for “ridge”), whose presence dates back to the thirteenth century and whose population swelled during Inquisition times when Jews were driven from Spain and Sicily and chased up through the Italian boot in what is now Calabria. The Jewish Quarter of Timpone (it was not a ghetto because the Jews were never forced or locked inside) exists today and visitors can see what was once the old synagogue, whose window still retains a portion of the *Magen David* (Star of David), as well as the cemetery and the remains of the *mikveh*, all of which is available for

viewing and for study. Villella writes, however, that “Strangely enough not one local historian ever recorded the Jewish presence in Nicastro” (p. 25).

So how did Professor Villella find and document Nicastro’s Jewish presence? Villella is alert to any part of any village that has an area, a street or even an alley that could be identified as Jewish. Because Jews created tight-knit communities for religious, social and practical reasons (such as safety), locals referred to these areas as *judeca*, *giudecca*, *iudeka* or *via d’ebrei* (street of the Jews). Villella employed a two-pronged approach. First he did the grunt work. By searching a myriad of obscure tax and notary records, (Colafemmina, 1989; Archivio di Stato di Napoli) Villella found hard evidence of a Jewish presence in Nicastro and throughout Calabria—a presence even more significant given the regular harassment and persecution that the Jews often faced.

For example, Villella perused documents that explained the work of the Fourth Lateran Council convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215. There were seventy specific rulings, called “Constitutions,” and Villella found that Constitutions 67 through 70 specified how Jews should be treated. Jews were described as “*onerosus* and *infestus*,” (hateful and harmful), were not permitted to access public offices or facilities during Christian Holy Week and converted Jews were strictly observed to see if they reverted to any of the Jewish practices that they had publicly renounced (pp. 16-17).

It was also during the Lateran Council that laws were enacted to require Jews to wear identifying badges on their clothing—the same mark required of compulsive gamblers and blasphemers. Jews were forced to don a yellow or red hat when they left the Jewish quarter or to have a red or yellow disc sewn onto their cloaks. Later, men were forced to wear a yellow scarf and women were made to cover their heads with a yellow veil, the same type and color of those worn by prostitutes. As time went on, documents indicate that Jews were described as a “necessary evil.” By the end of the thirteenth century, persecutions began in earnest, with the first recorded massacre of Jews in all of Italy taking place in Naples. In fact, today one can find the *scannagiudei*, the small alley in Naples where the massacre occurred. *Scannagiudei* literally means “stick the Jew” (page 18-23)!

With each action, each persecution, each outrage, the Jews held their ground either by taking initiative and locking themselves inside their quarters or packing up and moving on. Indeed. Oreste Dito, in his work describing Calabrian history and Jewish life in Calabria from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries (1979), describes this activity. He notes that as Jews moved throughout Calabria, they created communities everywhere from Nicastro to Monteleone, Tropea, Nicotera and Seminara; to the planes of St. Eufemia and Palmi; to Arena, Galataro, Tritanti, Maropati, Reggio, Gerace, Cosenza, Acri, Bisignano, Castrovillari, Rossano, Squillace, Tiriolo, Maida, Martirano and to many more areas (p.5).

As we cross the piazza and walk in the direction of Nicastro’s Jewish Quarter I am confused. I ask Professor Villella how all of this was missed. How the rich Jewish history of Calabria that literally surrounds us could have been ignored so completely. Villella, whose most recent work is a book of original poetry that he based upon biblical texts, is philosophical. He is convinced that earlier historians made a grave error, which was to assume that because synagogues no longer existed, Jews no longer existed. What these historians did not understand is that while synagogues were burned and Jewish schools were



closed, Judaism continued as Spanish and Italian Jews took our traditions into the closets, cellars and secret rooms of our own homes. Eliminating institutional Judaism did not mean the end of Judaism

Villella is convinced that, for centuries, the Jews in Calabria behaved as the Jews in Spain had done years before. They practiced in secret. I nod because, heaven knows, I can relate. My own grandmother took her Shabbat candles downstairs into the *cantina* so many times that when she came to America she couldn't seem to break the habit. Her very first Friday night in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, she gathered up her candles, *challah* and wine and headed downstairs. My father stopped her at the cellar door. He said, "Mama, you're in America now, the 'land of the free and the home of the brave'!" But she pushed him aside and continued on, saying, "*Shhh! Non sono sicura,*" or "You can't be too sure!"

Now I realize, after having lived and worked in Calabria for several years, that it was this secrecy that allowed Jewish practices to survive. We Jews call it *sechel*—good common sense. If "they" to believe that, pressured into conversion, we became observant Christians, then good! Let them think that. We know better.

They take away our synagogue, we take the candles into our homes. They tell us we can't be Jews in the dining room, we take the candles into the basement. We can't have Rosh Hashanah for our new year? OK, we'll blow a horn on Dec. 31, a Sicilian custom traced to the Jews. We can't call it *Pesach*? We have to say "*Pasqua*?" We'll adapt and eat *pane azimo* (unleavened bread) and when you ask us why we'll say "*fer la Pasqua dei ebrei,*" for the Easter of the Jews!

We'll put red strings over our baby's cribs but we won't say that we are observing a Jewish tradition from the Kaballah. No, that's just too dangerous. Instead we use the red string to keep away the "evil eye."

When we break an egg into the bowl and we see a blood spot we'll make sure to take it out. Not because it's a kosher tradition. That might give us away. Instead we'll say that the blood spot just isn't healthy. And we will never eat dairy and meat in the same meal because "*fa male,*" it's not good for the digestion.

No *tallit*? No prayer shawls? No problem. We will take our skill in weaving and dyeing, attributed to the Jews of Sicily and Calabria, and secretly make our own religious garment, which today is the *vancale*, or the Calabrian shawl made only in the Jewish *paese* of Tiriolo. The locals say that the *vancale* has its roots in the Jewish tradition that was once a part of Tiriolo's society. But when asked, we'll say that the *vancale* is just a scarf, when all the while we know that in local dialect *vancale* is a word that invokes the embrace of God.

And so it goes. For centuries we Calabrians took our Jewish traditions into our homes and our hearts and slowly, at first for safety reasons, and then for cultural reasons, the religious meanings of these rituals were lost. Our precious Jewish customs became family traditions and sadly, nothing more.

*I have just heard the news. Maria Paletta has died. My heart aches for this fine woman who once was the soul of our little neighborhood. With her bright smile and*

*outstretched arms, Maria never missed an opportunity to give a kiss and a warm embrace. And even when dementia took its toll and she forgot where her own door had been, and even when we neighbors gently led her home, she never lost her lovely smile. So when her son Samuele invited us in, we were touched by his gesture. We loved Maria and we didn't want her son to grieve alone. "Come each day this week," Samuele urged. "I will be receiving guests for seven days." Why seven days? Why at home? Why no funeral mass in the local church? My questions were answered when I parted the beaded curtain and stepped into Maria's "sorgiorno." The little kitchen-living room area had been transformed. The large table had been pushed to one side to make room for a circle of low, almost child-sized, hand-caned chairs. The mirrors were covered in white cloth, as was the television screen. On the table a large plate of hard-cooked eggs had been sliced in pieces and arranged in the shape of a six-pointed star. In the dimly lit room one white candle burned. "Samuele," I whispered, touching his arm. "These traditions are so beautiful. Do you know what they mean?" Samuele told me that he wasn't sure, except that he knew that his family had always been laici—secular. "We don't go to church for a funeral, but we do have these family traditions. Once someone told me we might have been Jewish."*

"We might have been Jewish." "I've always felt Jewish!" "I've been told that our surname may have been a Jewish name." "Our town was once a Jewish town." My years in Calabria have taught me to listen, not only to historians, who now have begun to acknowledge the strong Jewish presence that once stretched from "ankle to toe" along the Italian boot, but to the Calabrian people themselves, who have clung to their ancestors' Jewish traditions, even when they weren't completely certain about the What or the Why of their practice. Our Calabrian synagogue and the Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria (IjCCC) that creates a traditional complement for the religious experience, allows Italians and Italian-Americans to explore their Jewish traditions in an atmosphere of warmth and welcome.

It was only last May (2008) when nationally acclaimed columnist, Charles Krauthammer wrote in *The Washington Post* about diaspora Jews and what trouble we're having these days. Krauthammer warns that "Israel's Jewish population has just passed 5.6 million. America's Jewish population was about 5.5 million in 1990, dropped to about 5.2 million 10 years later and is in a precipitous decline that...will cut that number in half by mid-century." (p. A19)

Krauthammer isn't the only one to sound the alarm that Jews are in decline. Population studies, both Jewish and secular, some from as far back as fifteen years, indicate that, from Tel Aviv to Tampa and everywhere in between, our numbers are shrinking. Because researchers say there is no end in sight, I am compelled to continue my efforts in Calabria. Why go to all this trouble? Because I believe that Charles Krauthammer is right. The number of those who have had the luxury, actually the blessing, of being acknowledged Jews is in decline. But the number of those with Jewish ancestry, like Gianna, Enrico, Samuele and countless others throughout Calabria, who want to discover and embrace their Jewish heritage, is on the rise. As a rabbi, it is my responsibility to respond.

Gary Tobin (1999) writes in his powerful book, *Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion Can Revitalize the Jewish Community*, "I see people all around me who would be Jews if we helped them (p. xix). It is time to extend the hand of Jewish friendship to the

thousands of Calabrians and Sicilians who, just like Marias son, Samuele, are just now discovering their Jewish roots. We've done it in Spain. We've done it in Portugal. Now it is time to let the anusim of Calabria know that their long lost Jewish family awaits them and that we welcome them home.

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