

## ISABEL AND ME AND THE JEWS OF ITALY

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Last August, my 12 year old granddaughter and I sojourned in Italy. We joined a formal tour but had ample time to explore on our own. Isabel attends a Jewish day school so I felt that examining our own religion within the context of a Catholic country lent some balance to our adventure. At every opportunity we visited Jewish neighborhoods and synagogues. Isabel's reactions were important to me especially as they resonated with my own, my having lived well over half a century more than she had.

In Italy, at the present time, there are 35000 Jewish residents, all of whom are Orthodox.. The first Jewish settlers came to Rome in 139 BCE from Eretz Israel. They punned on the name Italy and called it "I-tal-yah" (Land of the day of the Lord). Since Jews have been in Italy for over 2000 years their behavior is remarkably Italian. Their religious services are not strictly Ashkenazi or Sephardi but most synagogues are considered Sephardic. However in Rome, besides a Sephardic service, there is a separate unique "Minhag Romi" (the Italian liturgical rite of Rome), the oldest European Minhag brought directly from Palestine with a few Sephardic additions. The Italian influence is strong. In the Roman ghetto, an unusual Judeo-Roman language is spoken. It is a combination of Roman dialect and Hebrew expressions.

Argentina Square abuts the Jewish Ghetto there. The word "argentini" means silver in Italian. Our guide informed us that the Jews were called "Argentini" since they were the money lenders, an occupation which was forbidden to Catholics. Isabel was pleased to have a square "named after us." I wondered if there was some implied derision in that title. Later, in New York, I searched the internet for the exact origin of the name "Argentina Square." My suspicions were validated. The name of the square comes from "Torre Argentina" which takes its name from the city of Strasbourg whose original name was Argentoratum. Was our guide spouting a popular myth or inventing one for our benefit?

Throughout Italian history the Jews were subject to the arbitrary whims of a variety of Popes, nobles and common people. There were periods of oppression interspersed with an occasional respite of calm and acceptance. The ultimate conversion of the Jews "at the second coming of Messiah" runs through Papal doctrine. Jews were confined to ghettos, the oldest established in Venice in 1516. As in all of Europe, there are annals of ongoing Anti-Semitism and disturbing statistics of monstrous losses during the Holocaust. Victims of that era often tell me that the experience cannot be imagined without having had endured it personally. My granddaughter commented that we are so insulated in America. We attend synagogue, complacent and unafraid. We can live wherever we please. She mused that if she had been victimized as a Jew and had to live in a ghetto, she "may have acquired more wisdom in the ways of the world." However, she would not welcome such an experience. I did not respond that confronting evil can also break the human spirit. The collective courage of the Jews is the true miracle, with their resilient capacity to transcend tyranny over the centuries and rebound time and time again. We were both gratified to learn that 8000 Jews were hidden and saved by Italian citizens during the horrific Nazi occupation.

We were not permitted to take pictures in the synagogues for fear of enemy surveillance. As recently as 1982, Hebrew school children who were playing in the yard outside the Rome synagogue were attacked with grenades by the PLO. A two year-old child was killed and many children were injured.

There could have been so many wonderful pictures to take. The artistry of each synagogue we visited delighted us. In Rome, a rainbow ceiling with stars and sky intrigued Isabel with its symbolism. She said that she was accustomed to more graphic representations of Bible stories in places of worship. We both loved the beautiful synagogue in Florence, with its Moorish influence, carvings in wood and bronze, inlaid marble floors and stained glass windows. This lovely place had been restored twice, courtesy of the taxpayers of Italy. During the Fascist era, the Nazis had used it as a garage as well as exploding several mines in its interior. In 1966 the River Arno overflowed and flooded the building, damaging Torah scrolls, books and artifacts.

Isabel was surprised at the size of the Ghetto in Venice. She had visualized narrow streets with a few ancient buildings. Instead, there were several wide Squares surrounded by five Synagogues. Despite their purposeful plain façade, the places of worship within were artistically elaborate. Isabel remarked that we had never seen synagogues like that before. How could they have kept these magnificent interiors so well preserved for such a long time?

My granddaughter was excited to read the familiar Hebrew blessings in the Jewish Museums we visited.. It was a comfort for us both to be touched by the universality of our tradition. We both noticed that the Torahs were covered with brocade and the finials and crowns were massive, more artistically intricate than ours at home.. Despite the difference in design, we knew that inside every one was the same Scroll of the Law that is so sacred to every Jew.

At these Museums, we shared tours with fellow Jews from all over the world and several Israelis. It was cathartic for us to encounter the familiar in a country where we were strangers, in so many ways. In the United States, I have friends from all cultures and religions.. There are no barriers. I am accustomed to an assimilated environment. In Italy, so predominantly Catholic, it was different. My 12 year old confided "I do not feel so alone in the world, especially when I see another Jew."

I asked her how she felt about anti-Semitism. She answered, "When someone discovers that I am Jewish, I feel self-conscious. If I am Jewish, they may not like me because of the history of anti-Semitism." Yet I overheard her describe her dual curriculum at school with a 12 year old non-Jewish girl with whom she had bonded. Perhaps, I thought, I feel the same way. Firstly, my religion is generally irrelevant. If it is deemed pertinent, I do not hesitate to disclose it. However, I prefer not to do so until I have first established a positive human connection.

Originally, I had proposed the trip to Italy because of its abundant art treasures. Isabel is exceptionally creative so the country and the child were a perfect match. Although she relished everything, Michaelangelo's two majestic sculptures of Moses and David moved us both the most, not only for their inherent beauty but also for their relationship to the Old Testament.

Our first stop was to see the powerful Moses, housed discreetly in the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli, which is located in a hidden back street in Rome. When we arrived there, the church was fairly empty and we had ample room to view the glorious statue. The controversial "horns", an interpretive distortion that has been conveniently used to malign the Jews, was originally planned to become a series of flames radiating from the head. However, the work was never completed because at the same time, the Pope summoned the artist to devote his full attention to the Sistine Chapel.

We had to contend with huge crowds to view David, probably the most spectacular sculpture in the world.. It is displayed prominently in Florence's Accademia Museum. The glowing figure did not represent the King we revere in our history, nor the teenager who slew Goliath, depicted in the Bible, but rather a 17 foot Adonis, poised to execute the legendary slaughter. We agreed that despite his creative license, Michaelangelo's masterpiece was the highlight of our trip.

At the Vatican, Isabel whispered to me that one of the large picture mosaics displayed Hebrew letters. Hebrew seemed to be out of context at the Vatican although we knew full well that a Jew was the catalyst for all this opulence. We learned that the picture was about Mary being welcomed into King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

Our trip to the Vatican had begun very early in the morning. We had withstood the crush of the multitude, the heat and the long extensive tour of tapestries, mosaics, statues and paintings. That afternoon, we decided to loll on the patio of our hotel, and recover. We were alone and in the quiet, we talked about our respective relationship to Judaism and to God. We discussed our traditions and the miracle of its continuity. We spoke about community and how the essence of God within each one of us propels our faith, no matter how fleeting and transcendent it may be.

I am convinced that Isabel is a committed Jew. Wherever she may travel in her lifetime, she will always remember her heritage, and that commitment will perpetuate for many generations to come.

We returned home two days after unsettling news of the terrorist plot to invade the airways. At the Marco Polo airport in Venice, there were long lines, unending questions and intense scrutiny of our belongings. I did not share my thoughts with Isabel. All week, she had been exposed enough to the raw history of anti-Semitism. But, I could not help reflecting that the political-religious terrorism of our time, targeted against the West and Israel, has a raging anti-Jewish component. I could not separate our experience at the airport from that alarming concept.

Isabel and I were patient with every inconvenient regulation because we knew our safety was better assured and at the end of the day, we would touch American soil, at long last. We would return to our country with its noble history of allowing all children, of every ethnicity, to be educated and worship God, however they choose, and become whomever they want to be.