

Video Clip: Italian Jews

Benè Romì and Hanukkah

Jews have been in Italy since the second century BCE when the Maccabees defeated the Hellenizing powers in Jerusalem and made a treaty with pre-empire Rome. Since then, for over two millennia, their settlement in the Italian Peninsula has been continuous, although their status and settlement has changed based on the ruling powers. Additionally, Jewish communities from Spain, North Africa, and Iran have found refuge in Italy. Even so, the two-millennia old community kept its unique traditions to this day.

Suggested Implementations

Holidays

1. Hanukkah
2. Tisha B'Av

Jewish History

1. Destruction of the Temple

Philosophy

1. Traditions vs. unity in Judaism

Background

It is well known that the Maccabees, led by Judah Maccabeus, revolted against the Seleucid Empire, leading to a miraculous victory that is commemorated every year in the story of Hanukkah. What is less well known is that following their success, the Maccabees made a treaty with Rome to become their allies, as a way of protecting themselves from other powers and from Rome itself. It is written in the Book of Maccabees 1:

“May all go well with the Romans and with the nation of the Jews at sea and on land forever, and may sword and enemy be far from them.... Thus, on these terms the Romans make a treaty with the Jewish people.” (8:23-29)

Once this treaty was made, in the 2nd century BCE, a group of Jews living in the Holy Land settled in Rome and other parts of the south of Italy. There are tombstones and dedicatory inscriptions that reveal their presence there in those times.

A new wave of Jews from Jerusalem came when Rome captured the city and burned the Second Temple in 70 CE. The Romans took the Temple's treasures along with Jewish slaves, as is commemorated on the Arch of Titus in Rome. This new group of Jews in Rome received support and was emancipated by the fairly established local Jewish community.

Then, Emperor Constantine's acceptance of Christianity as a 'legal' religion in 313 CE marked a transition in the status of Jews in the Italian Peninsula. The 380 CE Edict of Tessa Lonica of Teodosia recognized Christianity as the official religion of the Empire and officially lowered the status of Jews. Over the centuries, with the changing of ruling powers in the Peninsula, the status of Jews would sway.

As would their settlement location within Italy. When the Spanish Inquisition reached Sicily, the Jews moved northward within the Italian Peninsula. The Spanish Expulsion also saw an influx of Spanish refugees emigrating to the peninsula. They, however, remained separate from the Italian Jews in prayers and customs.

In the sixteenth century, Pope Paul IV instituted the Papal Bull, dramatically changing the status of Jews and leading to the creation of the first 'ghettos.' The Papal Bull decreed that all Jews were to wear a 'contrassegno' (identification), their civil and commercial rights revoked, they must live in ghettos and could have only one synagogue.

With Napoleon's rise, the gates of the ghettos were opened but once again closed with his defeat. In 1848 came the Italian Revolution and with it, the rights of the Jews of Italy returned. And just as their integration into Italian society was nearly complete, Mussolini and the Fascist Movement once again revoked rights that, this time, were included in the Italian Constitution. During World War II, Jews were sent to labor camps until the Germans took power of central and northern Italy and sent its Jews to death camps.

Following World War II, a group of Ashkenazi Jews moved to Italy. Then, in the 1960's and 1970's Jewish refugees from North Africa and Iran emigrated to the Italian Peninsula.

Even so, the Italian Jews who settled there two thousand years ago, maintain a unique tradition of prayer. It is distinct from the Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions and is known as the custom of Benè Romì. Among the distinction in their prayers is the last line of "*Al Hanissim*," a prayer recited on Hanukkah where the story of the Jewish settlement in Italy began.

"וכשם שעשית עמדם נס, כן עשה עמנו ה' אלוקינו פלא וניסים בעת הזאת, ונודה לשמך הגדול סלה"

"Just as You did a miracle with them, so may Gd do with us wonders and miracles at this time, and we shall thank You in Your Great Name."

Questions for Discussion

1. Why would the Benè Romì specifically include that last sentence in their "*Al hanissim*" prayer? What is the significance and parallel?
2. Benè Romì, or Italian Jews, maintained their customs and traditions despite many waves of immigration throughout the centuries. Is there an importance and significance in keeping one's family's traditions and heritage? What about the concept of *am yisrael*, as one people? (see Rabbi Kook on not eating meat of other traditions, and Rabbi Uziel and Rav Goren on being involved in *nussah ahid*, one liturgy for all Jews)

Suggested Readings

About the community: <https://museoebraico.roma.it/en/> <https://eurojewcong.org/communities/italy/>

Prayers and liturgy of Italian Jews: <https://d31711.wixsite.com/torahit>

Photo archive of life in the 19th century: <http://digital-library.cdec.it/cdec-web/>