

History of Jewish Rome

For more than two thousand years Jews have lived in Rome, making it the oldest Jewish community in Europe. Traces of Jewish heritage are embedded throughout the city ranging from the ruins of Roman era synagogues, to ancient catacombs, to the grandiose turn of the century Great Synagogue on the banks of the Tiber.

The Jewish community in Rome dates back to 161 BCE when representatives sought help against Antiochus IV. Many Jews decided to move to Rome because it was a good trade center. After Titus destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the community expanded. Because they predate the division into Sephardic and Ashkenaz (those who went to Moorish Spain and those who went to northern or eastern Europe), the Roman Jews speak neither Ladino nor Yiddish. They have their own language that is a mixture of Hebrew and Italian, and their own culture. Of course, when the Sephardic Jews were expelled from Spain by the Catholics in the fifteenth century or when Ashkenaz Jews had to flee their homes, some went to Rome.

In 1555 the Pope issued a decree that forced all Jews to live in a ghetto next to the Tiber River. Not only were Jews restricted to this area and excluded from most jobs. Every Shabbat they had to go to a nearby Catholic church to hear a priest preach conversion at them.

Only during the brief time that the citizens of Rome tried to set up a government separate from the Pope and when Napoleon conquered, were the Jews freed. When Italy was unified in 1870 the Ghetto was finally demolished.

Mussolini again enforced laws excluding Jews from schools and professions, but he did not carry out the genocide of German fascism. However, in 1943 the Germans occupied Italy. When the SS commander arrived in Rome, he told the rabbi that the community could be ransomed for 50 kilos of gold. The Jews frantically collected the gold from all their households and from Christian friends who would help. Two weeks after the 51 kilos were delivered, the SS began its raids, sending about 2091 of the 9,000 Jews in Rome to the death camps. Others hid in the ruins, in places like the Coliseum.

Now there are about 15,000 Jews, they are called Romanim, that's because Jews trace their Roman roots back to the second century B.C.E., well before the larger Jewish Diaspora.

All Synagogues are Orthodox, which, like other local institutions, are funded by a voluntary tax on the city's Jews. One thousand children attend the community's school, which runs from kindergarten to 12th grade. There is also a small yeshiva, which serves to ordain Italian rabbis.

The Romanim keep their own traditions. Like Sephardim, at Passover, they eat not only matzah, but rice. And dating back to medieval days, they play musical instruments in the synagogue for such joyous events as weddings, although not on Shabbat or the High Holy Days.