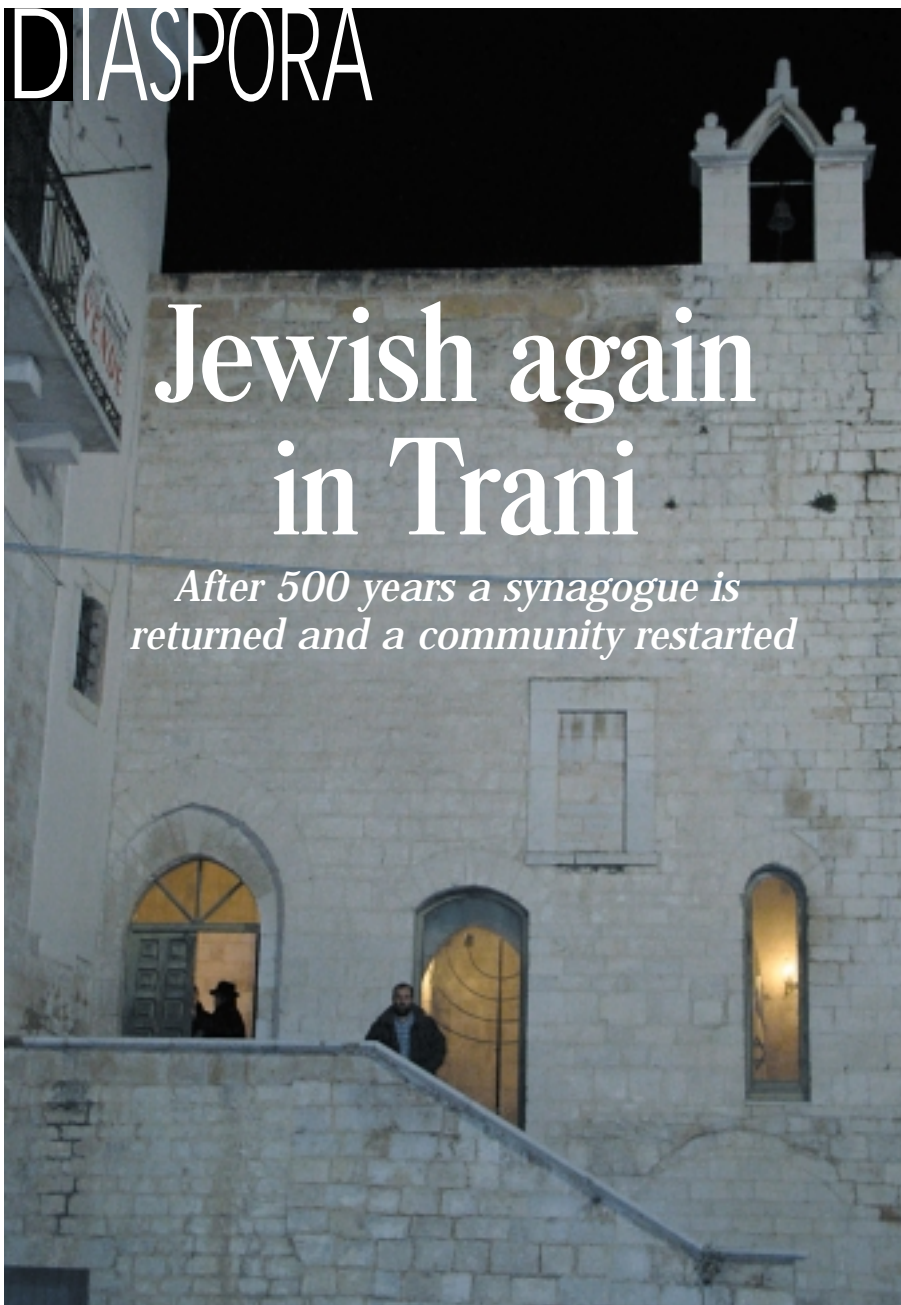


Jewish again in Trani

After 500 years a synagogue is returned and a community restarted



The picturesque Trani synagogue served as a Catholic church until the largely Neofiti community rediscovered Judaism. (Courtesy photo)

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The holiday of Tu B'Shvat is usually celebrated with a repast of fruits of the Holy Land, indicating the advent of the spring season and the renewal of nature. This past Tu B'Shvat brought us to an ancient building of gray stone that until this year was officially a Catholic Church. There we ate grapes, oranges, and bananas with a group of 25 people in a reconsecrated synagogue building that had been built almost 800 years ago (ca. 1240), and had not seen a Tu B'Shvat celebration in over 500 years.

Just a month earlier, the rabbi of the synagogue, Rabbi Shalom Bahbout, had done what would have been unthinkable for centuries; he publicly lit a Chanukah menorah. This all happened in the resurrected Italian Jewish community of Trani, which now prays in what is possibly the oldest functioning synagogue in Europe.

We were in Italy on a "halachic adventure" researching the etrog industry and its history on the southeastern coast of Italy. When over Shabbat we learned about the developments taking place in Trani we made the four-hour cross-country trek to witness it firsthand.

This was a chance to do two unusual

things. First, to observe history in the making as an old community was renewed, and second to connect to history by praying in the same town as two of the greatest medieval rabbis of Italy. The two scholars, the Mabit (Moshe of Trani), a renowned scholar, and Rabbi Isaiah di Trani, a prolific and prominent commentator and halachic authority who was born in Trani in 1180.

Trani is a seaport on the southwestern coast of Italy that in the 12th century had a flourishing Jewish community. For most of the 12th and first half of the 13th centuries the Jews enjoyed a measure of self-rule and governmental protection leading to a thriving Jewish quarter. By the end of the 13th century the situation deteriorated, leading to confiscations, forced baptisms, and blood libels. Many Jews fled over the years, although for several centuries there was a strong Neofiti (the name by which Italian "marranos" were known) community alongside the vestiges of the Jewish community.

In 1510 the Jews were expelled from all of Puglia, Italy's southern "boot heel" that includes Trani, and the Jews left Trani for the long haul in 1541 because of a decree that obligated them to choose between baptism or exile. Most of the Jews chose exile, fleeing to places such as Salonika and Corfu.

In the early stages of the persecutions in 1290, four synagogues were confiscated and converted into churches. Two of these, Scolagrande and Scolanova, still stand. For close to 700 years these two majestic buildings reflected the difficulty of Jewish life in a Catholic continent. The space for the mezuzah still remains in the doorframe. The indentation in the wall for the Torah scroll is still there, and remnants of a mikva can be found in the basement.

All of Italy was freed from the shackles of the Church in 1861, but no Jews practiced in the open in southern Italy for well over 300 years, and no community was reconstituted in Trani or its neighboring towns.

UNBEKNOWNST TO the outsider, however, Neofiti Jews continued to practice their unique hidden brand of religion in the region.

This mini-miracle of resurrection began with Professor Francesco Lotoro, a pianist and conductor, who had been researching the music of concentration camps for over 15 years. Two years ago, he and his wife officially converted to Judaism through the Rome rabbinical court. Today they live a fully observant Jewish life in Trani and we were privileged to meet them.

After converting, the Lotoros approached the Trani municipality to request use of the Scolanova synagogue, which was no longer being used as a church and had been standing empty for the past 50 years. When their request was granted in November 2005 they immediately assembled the scattered group of Jews from the general geographic area to pray there and organized a community and synagogue.

As they entered the ancient building for the first time, they were dumbfounded to see that a medieval oil painting of Mary had been hung in the niche where the ark had originally been. The Catholic church refused to remove it, even if it would be preserved and displayed in a museum. Moreover, as a protected historical site, it was prohibited for the nascent Jewish community to touch the painting.

The Jews turned to Rabbi Bahbout, who in turn posed the question to former Israeli Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, who ruled that they could cover the picture with a more appropriate picture. The solution was a poster of a menorah, which now covers the painting and decorates the niche.

Bahbout was born in Tripoli in 1944 and was ordained by the Italian Rabbinic College in 1965. He is the founder and dean of Beit Midrash Tifereth Yerushalayim – the Italian Academy for Hebrew Studies in Jerusalem, which was opened in 2003, and in addition to the Trani synagogue, is the rabbi of the Panzieri Fatucci Synagogue in Rome. Bahbout has also served as the director-coordinator of the Beit Din of Rome and lectures in physics in the Faculty of Medicine in Rome La Sapienza University.

The existence of the synagogue in Trani has reawakened Judaism in the region. In the first half of the 20th century in Sannicandro Garganico, a town north of Trani, a relatively uneducated non-Jewish World War I disabled veteran received a Bible from a Protestant chaplain. That gift started him on a trek to observing the com-

mandments as written. He attracted a following and then claimed to have had a vision of the menorah as described in the book of Zechariah. The group of 40 or 50 eventually converted to Judaism after World War II, and the majority moved to Israel and settled in Birya, near Safed. The descendents of some of those who remained behind, a new group of 30 to 40, have now started observing the commandments and have joined with the emerging Trani synagogue.

Some of the Neofiti have started joining as well. One member, Avraham Zecchillo, remembers his grandmother leaving church before the Eucharist, and kissing the spot where the mezuzah should have been. He also remembers a form of *pidyon haben* (redemption of the first-born son) that was done with a priest. He told us that on the 30th day after a first-born male was born, they would go to the church and sit on the side opposite where the door with the mezuzah was and receive a special secret blessing from the marrano priest. He has since formally converted to Judaism and is an active member of the fledgling community. All four of his children reside in Israel.

(The unusual marrano priest, it turns out, is not so unusual. We went to Portugal on this same "halachic adventure," following in the footsteps of the Portuguese Inquisition to try and map their customs surrounding the baking of matzah. There we met a 65-year-old priest who came to us in the synagogue, and told us how close he felt to Judaism. What he left unsaid to us but had previously told the local rabbi, was that he was one of 10 children in what he thinks must have been a marrano family and he was sent to learn for the priesthood. The marrano families felt that a child as a priest served as an excellent "cover" for their Jewishness. After all, what sort of Jewish family would send their son to study for the priesthood?)

The fledgling Trani community has received assistance from both the Italian Rabbinic Council and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI). The community has even succeeded in publishing a Jewish calendar for 5766, based on Trani's latitude and longitude. They are in the process of establishing an extensive educational network that will include a yeshiva, Jewish school for children, archive, library, center for the study of Jewish music, and a bed and breakfast.

With the exception of the second story of the synagogue, which the community received from the municipality, all other infrastructure is lacking. The rabbi comes from Rome every two weeks to teach classes and instruct bar and bat mitzva age children. Special events now attract approximately 40 people on a regular basis. These people see much room for growth since there are 1000 individuals in southern Italy who give their "religious tax" to the Italian Jewish community.

They are looking to acquire the building next door, which once contained the women's gallery, and the mikve (whose stairs and pool are still evident) in the basement. There is hope that the anti-Semitism of the past is gone – the Archbishop of Trani came to the Scolanova Synagogue to greet Rabbi Shalom Bahbout – and that a revitalized Trani community can flourish.