

Ancient Jewish cemeteries in Spain: the need for dialogue



Open graves, Jewish cemetery in Toledo, 2008

In the last three years, the Jewish community in Barcelona and Catalonia took a pro active approach in the protection of Jewish legacy in the country, aware of the Jewish people's role to bring meaning to its interpretation and presentation of an element that is part of the country's history.

In 2006, the three congregations in Barcelona created the *Heritage Commission* that, together with the *Center of Studies of Montjuïc*, requested the Catalan government to assign landmark status to the ancient Jewish cemetery in Barcelona, with the goal of dignifying the memory of the community from the Middle Ages, and to explain its meaning and value to the general society (see Raíces nº 76, fall 2008).

A year later, in reply to our request, the Catalan government initiates a process for landmark designation, during which public work -planned for the area by the municipality- has to be interrupted.

The *Heritage Commission* also tried to look for an alternative to the excavations that, prior the construction of a residential complex, were taking place in the ancient Jewish cemetery of Tarrega (two hours west of Barcelona, in Catalonia). They requested the opportunity to explain to the mayor about funerary criteria followed in Judaism and to talk about the interest of protecting and respecting the site. At the same time they asked the Catalan government to assign this old necropolis the same protection level as a 'historic site', just as it was being done in Barcelona.

Meanwhile, the news about these excavations went around the world and raised great concern and pressure from Jewish and non Jewish organizations in Europe, Israel and the USA. In reply to this situation, the Catalan government decided that once the excavations were completed, instead of proceeding with laboratory tests of human remains -a standard archaeological practice- these be turned to the Jewish community. This ruling was the same as that in 1996 during the construction on a site in Valencia, where the human bones were re buried in Barcelona's Jewish cemetery.

Both cases raised complaints from the scientific sector, with claimed that stopping archaeological work -including research- is contrary to the constitution, and unacceptable if this was done to favor a religious minority.

Barcelona symposium

In the last six months there had been three professional meetings centered on Jewish archaeology in Sepharad, some exclusively dedicated to necropolises.

In Lucena (Cordoba), as result of the construction of the city's beltway, an ancient Jewish cemetery was found. And the *National Sessions for the Research of Jewish Necropolis in Sepharad* were organized by the Municipal government in October.

In Murcia, where remains of a synagogue were discovered, a conference about Middle Ages Jewish archaeology in the Iberian peninsula was celebrated February 2009.

In the context of what has lately happened in Catalonia with ancient Jewish cemeteries, the Museum of History of the City (MUHBA) called for this symposium last January, proposing to "*analyze the vicissitudes experienced in other actions on Jewish necropolises, and then to approach the case of Barcelona from the legal and scientific standpoints.*"

At Center of Studies ZAKHOR we understand that initiatives for dialogue and debate are very necessary to present, analyze and understand the different and legitimate concerns.

Unfortunately this meeting did not offer an opportunity for debate and it does not seem to have been organized with a sincere interest in dialogue. The majority of the speakers, as well as the

audience, were either archaeologists or public officers in charge of cultural management, which agreed with the “*interventionism*” approach and the presentation of a one sided position of “*science above all*”. This was ratified in the last session of the program, by a public notary who stressed aspects of current legislation, making clear that “*rights are defined for Catalans and not for Jewish Catalans*”.

Representing another point of view, the only voice representing Spanish Judaism, was that of the Federation of Jewish Communities (FCJE), in a round table together with MUHBA representatives, Barcelona University and the General Heritage Direction of the Catalan government. Dalia Levinsohn, FCJE’s secretary, faced a real challenge which was very well defended, when having to explain the concerns of the Federation and of the Spanish Rabbinical Council. Most important is to look for dialogue and work towards an acceptable solution which respects the sensibility of funerary criteria in Judaism as well as the prohibition to exhume.

The recurrent issue of “*historic discontinuity*” of Jews in Catalonia (and Spain) was brought up by organizers and by presenters, as an argument to deny the connection that the Jewish community (local or international) claims today with regards to historic cemeteries. Joan Roca, MUHBA Director, said: “*I want to stress on these two concepts, that of public character of the heritage and that of historic discontinuity*”, words that were reinforced by the public notary, who stated: “*juridical relations expire with the passing of time, and after 600 years there are no more rights. Nobody can request that a site is respected with religious criteria. To recover the memory may be sacred, but not to obtain privileges. In memory, there are no singularities.*”

This article is not meant to cover each one of the technical presentations. We have learned of the different models of intervention in ancient Jewish necropolises. There is the case of Sagunto (Community of Valencia), where replicas of graves in the way of those in the Middle Ages are being built. Or the case of Seville (Andalucia), explained by a representative of the Culture Council of the Government of Andalucia, who suggested that “*we should not get lost in the sterile discussion about who should be the custodian of human remains*” and ended by saying that “*now we have data to begin to build a discourse of Seville’s ‘juderia’*”.

After this display, we ask ourselves, where were the historians? And the archaeologists with a different point of view? Or the recommendations of lawyers with another understanding of national and international laws? Why were the professionals of human science, other professionals and interest groups, not invited to make a presentation?

Public heritage issues not only belong to the ‘official level’ where the many and diverse layers in the society will never be represented. It is precisely the integration of this diversity that will contribute to the understanding of such legacy. If we accept that we are in front of a very complex issue, through which society could try to comprehend its own morphology, then we cannot do without an exchange of ideas and multiple consultations. Therefore we should be aware that much more than twelve hours of scientific and legal debate are needed. In this sense, the symposium at MUHBA was one more in the agenda of conferences about archaeology that will continue to be organized in Spain.

The theme of the symposium was set up around the future interventions on the necropolis on Montjuïc, nonetheless we have not been able to present our experience. Representatives of MUHBA and of the City government made some indirect references to our work, which in now way offered an idea of what undoubtedly was an exemplary participation process within the framework provided by legislation. Since the onset of this period of Spanish democracy, this is one of the cases in which a request raised from the civil society generates the designation of a cultural site as a landmark. Along these lines, one of the only clear interventions about the concept of ancient Jewish cemeteries being sites of interest to the general citizenship, was by Jordi Martí, culture delegate of the Ajuntament de Barcelona, who closed the symposium with these words: “*the challenge is to guarantee living together in diversity, which is only possible within a legal frame. What is being claimed is a piece of public heritage which belongs to ALL the society and not just to a certain group of people.*” In this sense, ancient Jewish cemeteries do not belong exclusively to archaeologists and historians, but also to citizens and their ancestors.

We insist in the need to have a full inventory of ancient Jewish cemeteries in Spain, and the best definition of their limits. Once they are incorporated in the property registers of each city or municipality, avoiding surprises during construction and respecting them as historic sites in the future urban planning.

As our contribution to this type of work, ZAKHOR is compiling the results of a thorough research project in collaboration with the Center of Studies of Montjuïc and the Archives of the Crown of Aragon, by which we will soon be able to establish the boundaries of the Jewish cemetery in Barcelona.

Declaration of Barcelona

The symposium ended with an eight point Declaration which, in essence approves excavations and analysis of the bones, leaving “*what is to be done with the remains once the research is completed*” as the only issue that needs to be discussed and decided.

The declaration -which was supposed to be a draft to start an exchange of ideas, ascertains and confirms many “*a priori*” more than presenting the true questions that we are facing with the issue of necropolis in general.

Given that the panelists and the audience basically shared the same position, this document presents a worrying unilateral position that reduces the problem to an issue of majority/establishment vs minority/religion instead of turning it into a matter of diversity/respect/social maturity.

Considerations

Los people of the Iberian peninsula and the Jewish people have coincided and shared their lives during centuries until 1492, in very different societies than those today. Due to the intolerance of those times, the Jewish minority had to decide between giving up their identity or giving up their long settling.

Since a little over one century, these peoples coincide again in the same place, in a European society, modern and democratic, each one with different experiences regarding the relation with the land and the way of narrating, interpreting and explaining their own history.

It would be interesting to consider the work on a common public heritage as meeting opportunity from where we can restructure a dialogue, repair broken ties, use past experiences to define and generate the kind of society that we want to forge.

The table is set. The menu ingredients should be an open mind, a true interest to comprehend the minorities in society, no speed and to learn about the different experiences and knowledge. Extreme or inflexible positions are totally unacceptable in a democracy. Maybe this way we can begin to understand the history and the multiple connections between religious, cultural and ethnic identities. A thorough reflection will help society to place this chapter of Jewish history within the overall history of Spain and to protect an important piece of the heritage of humanity as part of the process of building the diverse society that we live in.

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For Raíces Magazine nº 78 – Spring 2009

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