

In the discovery of Jewish past in Spain

The Jewish history in Spain, brutally interrupted by the expulsion decree of 1492, recovers itself since some decades ago, specially in big cities as Barcelona and Madrid. It first nourishes itself on an immigration of Turkish and Moroccan origin, then recently Argentine, French or even Israeli.

This situation, with young communities settled in a country where Judaism had disappeared during more than five centuries, presents a series of challenges of an extraordinary intensity. In a first instance, it is a matter of deciphering the extremely complex rapport between Spanish society and its Jewish history.

Then, the issue is of transmitting the idea that, contrary to the other cultures which lived across the Iberian peninsula, such as the Iberians or even the Romans, the Jews did not disappear and Judaism is far from being a dead culture. And that it is also necessary to restore its place within the cultural mosaic present in the Spanish society, establishing a direct link with the Jewish communities, which maintain that splendour in their spiritual inheritance, our literature and our liturgy.

It is not easy, but far from being impossible. It is along these lines that we have created -one year ago- the Heritage Commission of the Jewish Communities of Catalonia, representing the three currents present in Barcelona: the orthodox community, the liberal community and Chabad Lubavitch.

We work day and night so that it is understood that the local Jewish communities are totally able to respond to this call. The whole Jewish world follows with attention at what it happens here today, proof of which are the dozens letters that we receive, are sent to Spanish embassies, the government, the U.S. Congress, the Knesset or to the King of Spain. It is our responsibility to deliver to this expectation.

One of the most poignant examples of the work done, is what happened last July in Tárrega (little town in Catalonia, some 120 km. west of Barcelona). Its ancient Jewish cemetery, dating from the Middle Age, was discovered this year in May, during construction work. It was by accident that archaeologists informed us about it and that we intervened. The authorities had planned to send the human remains to the laboratories at the University of Barcelona for a series of exams.

Based on this, we began to work in two main directions: the first one consisted in explaining to the local authorities that according to our tradition a cemetery has no “*expiration date*”, that a person buried eight centuries ago deserves the same respect as another buried last week. It was thus necessary to stop the excavations immediately to find solutions that do not involve desecrating graves. The second step was to request that the bodies exhumed could be reburied without delay in the Jewish cemetery of Barcelona, the only one existing at present in Catalonia.



Some weeks later, the Spanish government followed by the Catalan local government, accepted our arguments to transfer the human remains to Barcelona. This operation started on July 30th this year, coordinated by the Heritage Commission of the Jewish communities of Catalonia, and concluded the following morning, July 31st, with the historic moment of restoring 158 bodies to the ground in Barcelona.

This is the first serious step made so that the status of Jewish cemeteries, abandoned after the pogroms of 1391 or the expulsion of 1492, is reconsidered; so that we cease to see the bodies of members of those communities which preceded us in these lands, as simple objects of historic study and consider them as human beings, with another faith, to whom we owe the dignity which had been denied to them.

This result in itself is extremely important, and we would not have been able to reach it without the local, national and international help by great figures in Jewish and non-Jewish world. We started a debate within the Catalan and Spanish society, between archaeologists, historians and politicians, which goes beyond the specific situation of this site and opens the possibility of saving hundreds of Jewish cemeteries all over Spain.



Proof of this, are the articles published these days in the Catalan press, that adhere to a manifesto presented by three archaeologists' associations. This text denounces a government gesture of respect to a religious tradition, against the will of scientists to study, as if it was any simple object, exhumed human bodies. Most interesting were the reactions sent by the readers, which supported unanimously our position, by answering to the archaeologists that a human being, even dead and buried, is not a piece of ceramics and it deserves another kind of respect.

There is still a lot to do, as it is now necessary to create the legal frame to prevent excavations of Jewish cemeteries, anywhere they appear. The authorities, regrettably, allowed for the continuation of diggings in Tárrega. We had to demand once again, that we are allowed to rebury the bodies immediately, and are still waiting for a reply.

We would like to end this brief article with the most moving phrase which we heard in all these days. We returned to Barcelona's cemetery the day after the inhumation, to complete the work on the site done by a workman and his small tractor. In the middle of it, while we were preparing to level off the pit, he stopped suddenly and said to us: *"I well realize that we have made here something big, very important. You know, I may only be a tractor workman but I am far from being simple, and I read a lot about Jewish culture. But by seeing the way you handled these dead yesterday, I was able to understand how you survived until today, regardless what you were subject to during all the history"*.

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