

Toledo - Yet another case??!!

A month ago, a short article appearing in the local paper of Castilla la Mancha tersely recounted that students at a public school in Toledo were beginning the new term along with some new classmates, “the remains of a medieval Jewish cemetery found during construction of six new classrooms.”

So we began asking for information, and a few days later we travelled to Toledo, accompanied by experts from Israel.



What happened a year and a half ago in Tàrrega, a small Catalan city some 120 km. west of Barcelona, is now repeating itself in Toledo, “the Capital of Sfarad (Spain).” That community featured the most developed and shining examples of Jewish culture in the history of the Iberian peninsula, until it ultimately found itself being compared to Jerusalem.

Remains of Jewish cemetery in Toledo

Toledo was the cradle of a society in which Judaism coexisted alongside the Catholic and Muslim traditions, creating a unique culture. It is where the famous translators’ school was founded, a clear symbol of its inhabitants’ thirst for understanding.

But Toledo especially modelled its Jewish life after what made it unique: its laws. The city’s rabbis, among them Rabenu Yonah Gerondi and the R’osh, Rabbi Asher Ben Yejiel, are the keystones of rabbinic tradition and of Judaism as we know it today.

The R’osh, born in 1250, fled from Germany and the slaughters that had taken place there early in the 14th century. He came first to Barcelona, where he was received by the R’ashba, Rabbi Shlomo Ben Adret. He continued on to Toledo, where he became the City Rabbi. His full teachings would be introduced 170 years later in the classic volume of Jewish tradition, “Shulchan Aruch” (“The Set Table,” or code of Jewish laws.)

Aided by the writings of these rabbis, this city inspired the dreams of dozens of generations of Jews in Talmudic study, as well as millions of Jews who recognized in Toledo an exceptional cultural environment. All that was erased from the map of Spain one terrible day in August of 1492, when the Catholic Monarchs (Ferdinand and Isabel) expelled all Jews from their kingdom and dispersed the wealth of their communities, thousand year-old cemeteries included.

When one physically comes face to face with this history, seeing in this day the remains of these people gone for centuries, the leap through time is overwhelming... Outside of museums, the few objects scattered throughout the world by the exiled Sephardim which most concern Judaism are their cemeteries. It is there that we find the communities of yore, and it is through them that we must proclaim Spanish society's responsibility for the bloody history of the expulsion and the Inquisition.

Given the enormous importance of the Toledo case, the Center of Studies Zakhor immediately petitioned local authorities to have the cemetery preserved and the remains, found in thirty graves excavated by archaeologists, reinterred *in situ*. We are continuing to press the issue, and thus the voice of each person who cares about this matters.



Two years ago, we, along with the Heritage Commission of the Jewish Communities, presented a petition for preservation to the Government of Catalonia to save the Jewish cemetery at Montjuïc, which did generate a positive response. It is the first example of what can be accomplished in different parts of the country if we maintain consistency with our traditions.

If it decides to, Toledo can continue being a touchstone of respect toward the different cultures which formed it, and its heritage will turn it into a space with profound cultural meaning.

But the situation is very precarious, and our task today is to explain the Jewish sensibility as it applies to these ancient burial places, and to press upon our fellow citizens a duty to remember. The future of hundreds of medieval cemeteries depends on this concern, and reflects, above all other considerations, the respect by our tradition toward Life.

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