



## Of the Jews of Rome and Let Freedom Ring!

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On a recent visit to Italy, David and I had the pleasure of *davening* at the largest and oldest synagogue in Rome, Temple Maggiore (The Great Synagogue). This synagogue, situated in the Old Jewish Ghetto, follows a traditional Orthodox liturgy. Men *daven* downstairs on the first floor level; women *daven* upstairs and must make a long climb up the stairs – there was no elevator – even elderly women, to what is about a fourth floor level. Filigreed screens separate the stadium pews ‘up in the bleachers’ in the women’s section from the large space of the synagogue. Aside from the separation of genders, this spacious building has much to recommend it: high ceilings, beautiful artistic decoration, an impressive bimah and a special reading table more forward toward the first floor pews and at pew-level for Torah reading. One level below the ground floor and next door to the synagogue is the Jewish Museum of Rome, closed on *Shabbat*, so we needed to return on Sunday to see the Museum.



Rome's Temple Maggiore

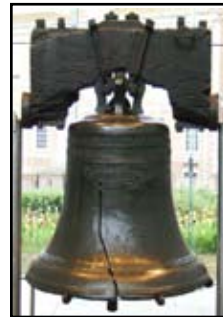
There were two remarkable aspects of the *Shabbat* service, and really only two, that differentiated the service from our traditional Saturday morning services – besides, of course, no women on the bimah. First, there was the special device used for framing the ‘*parasha*’ when the Torah scroll was open, it looked like some kind of an architect’s old-fashioned wooden frame and had cloth covers attached on the vertical sides of the frame rectangle. Thus, they were able to keep the torah scroll open to the *parasha* and then simply open and close the cloth covers before and after aliyot readings. The second remarkable aspect was musical and had to do with the actual melodies that were being chanted by the *Hazzan*. It was these melodies that spoke, or shall I say ‘sang,’ volumes about the history of the Jews of Rome.

These melodies sound nothing like our traditional Ashkenazic melodies, nor do they sound anything like those of the traditional Sephardic tradition, for those of you familiar with that tradition. Rather the Roman liturgical chant tradition, or Roman Rite, as it is known, is completely idiosyncratic, sounds a bit like early Christian chant, and has much to do with the very history of the Jews of Rome.

Jews came to Rome long before the common era (C.E.) and the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (70 C.E.). According to Macabbees I, the first Jews in Italy were the ambassadors sent to Rome by Judah Maccabee in 161 B.C.E. and they signed a treaty with the Roman Senate, although modern scholars have argued that this did not happen. It is accepted in modern times,

however, that an embassy was sent later by Simon Maccabeus to Rome to strengthen the alliance with the Romans against the Hellenistic Seleucid kingdom. And it is recorded that the ambassadors received a cordial welcome by other Jews who were already established there. Large numbers of Jews lived in Rome even during the Roman Republican period, largely poor and spoke Greek. Due to military and trade dealings with the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean, during the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C.E., many Greeks, Jews among them, came to Rome as merchants or were brought there as slaves. The most known remnant of Jews being brought to Rome as slaves, of course, can be seen on the Arch of Titus, which depicts the Roman conquest of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD and the carrying by Jewish captives of the Temple’s Menorah to Rome.

The fact is, then, that Jews have lived continuously in Rome since over 150 years before the common era. While expulsions occurred over the centuries of late antiquity and the middle ages, both from the Roman and the Christian eras in Italy, and indeed persecutions of various types throughout the ages, right up to the 20th century and the Holocaust, Jews have continued to survive and thrive in Rome right up to the present day. In fact, there are now 14 synagogues operating in greater Rome! And the melodies chanted in Temple Maggiore by the *Hazzan* on *Shabbat* morning sound like ancient Gregorian chant melodies and may actually pre-date those melodies! While the Jews of Rome and Italy in general, may have suffered persecutions and expulsions through the centuries, Rome always served as a ‘safe haven’ in some manner or other. Thus, we can think of the Roman cantorial *nusach* as reflective of this tradition of continuous Jewish life over many centuries, even if interrupted in certain times.



The Liberty Bell

Across the sea, this time the Atlantic, not the Mediterranean, freedom has always been an entitlement for Jews since the very beginning of the founding of the United States. The freedoms we take for granted in the United States today and in the last few centuries of the modern era for Jews arriving from countries throughout the world where they have suffered persecution are represented beautifully in the new National Museum of American Jewish History, newly opened on the Mall of Independence in Philadelphia. ([www.namjh.org](http://www.namjh.org))

I visited the museum recently along with 84 other members of the Women Cantors Network as part of our annual conference. The WCN commissioned a new piece of choral music for the occasion based on the Hebrew inscription on the side America’s Liberty Bell from the Book of Leviticus: “Proclaim Liberty thro’ all the Land to all the Inhabitants Thereof – Levit. XXV 15.” How interesting that our American forefathers (and foremothers) saw fit to invoke Moses right on our very Liberty Bell, the icon of America’s independence! And ‘Proclaim Liberty’ we women cantors did – all 85 of us – as we sang out in English and Hebrew in the museum’s atrium while those visiting the museum looked down from four floors of American Jewish history to hear our voices raised in song. From Rome to Philadelphia, let us celebrate the freedom we all so cherish! Let Freedom Ring! Proclaim Liberty! Happy Independence Day to All! And to all, a relaxing summer!

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