

After 500 years, a new synagogue opens in Sicily

by [Josephine McKenna](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue

More than 500 years after the Jews were expelled from Sicily, a tiny Jewish community will open its first synagogue in the island's capital city of Palermo.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Palermo transferred a chapel to the Jewish community. That chapel, the Oratory of Santa Maria al Sabato, was built above the ruins of the Great Synagogue which once stood in the center of Palermo.

The archbishop of Palermo, Corrado Lorefica, described the initiative as a “gesture of hope” designed to build dialogue between Catholics and Jews.

The Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies and Shavei Israel, a Jerusalem-based organization, had requested the transfer.

“It is with great joy that we have responded to this request to have a place of study and worship for the Palermo Jewish community,” Lorefica said in a statement. “This transfer is the product of a genuine friendship and ongoing dialogue between the church and Palermo's Jewish community.”

The ceremony took place on the anniversary of the decree that demanded the expulsion of Jews from Sicily during the Spanish Inquisition— January 12, 1493. At that time Sicily was ruled by Spain.

Noemi Di Segni, president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, said, “It is a gesture that will recover centuries of history.”

Shavei Israel, which is committed to rebuilding Jewish communities around the world and reinforcing their links with Israel, hopes the Palermo synagogue would revitalize the local community.

“Ever since I learned about Sicily's history, my goal has been to lay the groundwork for the establishment of the first Jewish community in Palermo in more than five centuries,” said Michael Freund, founder and chairman of Shavei Israel. “This is something that would have been unthinkable 50 or 100 years ago. “I am grateful to the archbishop of Palermo for having the vision and courage to make such a grand

gesture of reconciliation.”

Pinhas Puntarello, the former chief rabbi of Naples, will oversee the synagogue, which will include a study center (Beit Midrash) and a Jewish heritage center.

Jews have had a presence in Sicily for more than 1,400 years. Some scholars believe they were brought to the island as slaves after the capture of Jerusalem in the first century. They suffered forced conversions and systematic persecution over the centuries, culminating in the decree issued in 1493 by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. Estimates for the Jewish population of Sicily at that time run between 37,000 and 50,000.

Shavei Israel says it has been working with a number of Sicilians descended from Iberians whose forefathers were forced to convert to Catholicism in the 14th and 15th centuries yet preserved Jewish traditions and are now rediscovering their roots.

“It is a miracle that after more than 500 years there are still people in Sicily who proudly cling to their Jewish roots,” Freund said. “It is testimony to the fact that neither the expulsion nor the Inquisition was able to extinguish the eternal Jewish spark in their hearts.”

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