

Jewish catacombs found at Rome's Villa Torlonia

• By IRVING SPITZ
SPECIAL TO THE JERUSALEM POST

Cremation was a common practice for pagan Romans. With the emergence of Christianity, burials began to take place in catacombs. This word is derived from the Greek meaning “within the quarries.” Catacombs are underground cemeteries consisting of intricate labyrinths or tunnels with recesses for burial chambers. There are more than 60 catacombs in Rome which date from the end of the second to the early fifth century CE.

The vast majority represent the final resting places of Christians, but there are also several of Jewish origin. One of these is in the gardens of the Villa Torlonia in the northeast of Rome. This villa was built in the first half of the 19th century for the wealthy Torlonia banking family. In 1929 it was taken over by the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. After his death in 1945, the villa and gardens remained unused for many years, but have now been restored and are open to the public.

In 1918, while conducting alterations in the very extensive gardens, workers stumbled onto two separate catacombs which had been united. This was shown to be a large burial ground for Jews of the period. These catacombs are currently closed to the general public; I was fortunate to be taken on a tour by Cristiana-Barbara Pazienti, press representative of Atlazio, an agency which promotes tourism in Rome, and Simona Morretta, a senior archeologist from Rome's State Archeological Commission.

The long narrow passageways are surrounded on both sides by multiple levels of niches, or *loculi*, carved out of the rock. These loculi extend from ceiling to floor. Bodies were placed in these niches, which were then sealed with rubble and bricks and coated with a layer of lime. In addition there is also a *geniza*, or



RESTORATION IMMINENT: The frescos show from left to right: Lulav, menora, flask of oil, the Temple or Aron Kodesh in Jerusalem, shofar, menora, knife and etrog. (Irving Spitz)

depository, where old holy texts were deposited. These catacombs extend for more than 13,000 square meters. To access them, one has to descend a series of stairs.

The main interest in these catacombs is the plethora of beautiful colored frescos on the walls and vaulted ceilings. These represent iconographic Jewish symbols, and many are in an excellent state of preservation. These include the seven-branched menorah, shofar, ark with the law tablets, etrog, lulav, circumcision knife, cruse of oil and matzot. There are also depictions which may represent the façade of the Temple destroyed by Titus in 70 CE.

Additional frescoes include geometric patterns, grapevines, birds, plants and fish. Not unexpectedly, there are no depictions of humans, consistent with the Ten Commandments. Interestingly enough, the inscriptions found in these and other Jewish catacombs are in Greek and not Hebrew.

Radiocarbon testing was conducted by Prof. Leonard V. Rutgers. This revealed that these catacombs date from about 100 BCE (Rutgers et al., *Nature*, 2005). According to Rutgers, these specific catacombs predate Christian ones by at

least 100 years. This implies that catacomb burials may have begun as a Jewish custom.

On the other hand, it should be noted that oil lamps found in the catacombs of Villa Torlonia date from the end of the second to the early fifth century CE, so the precise dating of these catacombs is not definitely resolved. It should be remembered that the Roman Jewish Diaspora community dates back to the first century BCE. Roman law forbade burial in the city itself in view of the scarcity of land, so catacombs were established in the soft volcanic rock outside the city walls.

The management of the catacombs was originally under the direction of the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archeology. The current custodian is Rome's State Archeological Commission. Because of dangers of rock falls, noxious gases and in order to preserve the frescoes, these catacombs are closed to the general public. •

The writer, emeritus professor of medicine, is an avid traveler. He writes, reviews and lectures on medical topics, music, art, history and travel. www.pbase.com/irvspitz.