

Jewish Life

An illustrated Torah scroll, left, and cat artists Michal Meron and Alon Baker. MIRIAM PORTER PHOTOS

TRAVEL

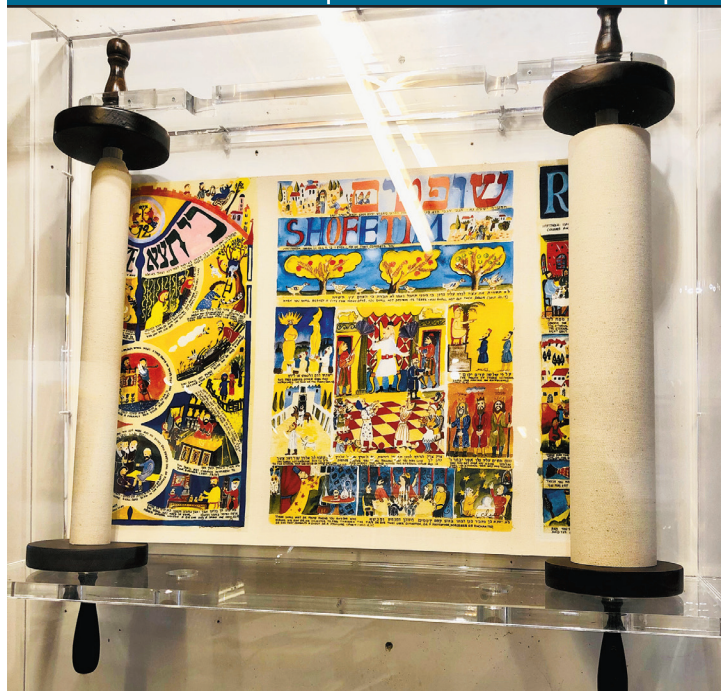
MUSIC

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PARASHAH



Venice: A tale of two ghettos

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There are 25 Jews living in the Jewish ghetto of Venice and I already met four of them within an hour of arriving to this gorgeous city. I had just landed from a very long overnight and sleepless flight from Toronto but when you only have a day and a half in Venice you don't want to waste it sleeping, trust me.

Venice is built on canals and the main way to get around is on foot or by boat. There are 150 canals, 400 bridges, and 118 islands that make up the capital of northern Italy's Veneto region.

My first images of Venice are exactly what I imagined – beauty and charm in every direction. I walk 10 minutes from Piazzale Roma where taxis drop off to Hotel San Geremia and Alloggi Gerotto Calderan. The hotel is located minutes from shops, restaurants and canals with views of the quaint San Geremia Square from my balcony.

Although only a small number of Jews live in the ghetto there are around 460 Jews in Venice. The origin of the word “ghetto” is in dispute, but it's highly likely the word derives from the Jew-

ish ghetto in Venice. In 1516 a law was established that Jews must live in a particular area that had been used as a waste dump for foundries, or *gettare* (throw away) as it was called. During the day Jews were permitted to leave and do business but come nightfall they were locked in the gated island of Ghetto Nuovo.

In my search for the ghetto I cross small bridges, walk past ancient buildings with colourful flowers hanging over balconies, admire canals and charming gondolas, and then back over the exact same bridges because I am lost. They say the best way to explore Venice is to get lost in Venice and this is simple to do. Eventually I discover San Geremia was only five minutes away from the ghetto.

It's a small square and I wander into an open door - Chabad of Venice. I speak to a polite young man who invites me for Shabbat dinner. I would have accepted his kind offer because some of the most beautiful Shabbats of my life were spent at Chabad homes. But I decline because I have a welcome dinner to attend with Intrepid Travel. It's my first trip with Intrepid and I am eager to meet my 12 travel companions

from around the world.

I leave Chabad and walk to the Jewish Museum of Venice, still in the Campo of the Ghetto Nuovo. This small museum founded in 1953 by the Jewish community of Venice is positioned between the two most ancient Venetian synagogues and included on the museum tour. The tour highlights the cycle of Jewish festivities and history of Venetian Jews.

Chatting with staff I discover there are two Jewish ghettos in Venice. The New Ghetto (Nuovo) where I am currently is actually the oldest ghetto, but not far away is the Old Ghetto (Vecchio), but it's actually newer. It has nothing to do with the historical period but simply the time of their use by the foundries.

Next to the museum is David's Shop and I am drawn to the sparkling jewelry and laughter. Minutes later I am also laughing with the owner of the store, David Curiel. His witty sarcasm is matched only by the fascinating stories of his family dating back 500 years in Venice. His sister Doriana, he says, was the first Jewish person to make Murano glass. Jews from around the world purchase delicate and colourful treasures at David's Shop and I don't leave empty handed.

With the setting sun looming in the distance the Jews of Venice get ready for Shabbat. I walk past a poster of endearing ghetto cats outside an art studio. I'm missing my kitty and ask the first stranger I see what it means. That is how I met Alon Baker and his wife Michal Meron, cat artists extraordinaire. Originally from Tel Aviv and now living in Venice, Baker smiles and says, “We are owned by five cats. Come meet them.”

I skip over in happiness to meet Jewish ghetto cats. Furry Penelope saunters over and I become the feline paparazzi. Their impressive studio is packed with colourful artwork and I purchase a cat painting. Alon gives me a picture book inspired by the Venetian ghetto with stunning illustrations by Meron. Perhaps most impressive is their illustrated Torah scroll designed using paintings of the 54 weekly *sidrot* of the Torah with texts in Hebrew and English.

Before meeting my group for dinner, I pay respects at the ghetto's Holocaust Memorial with a huge Magen David on the Italian brick wall and say a prayer for the Venetian Jews who were deported to the Nazi concentration camps. ■