

HANNUKAH LIGHTS IN *EL CALL*

Rituals and traditions never played a role in my secular Jewish family. Or, better said, they played a role just by their absence.

Growing up in Buenos Aires in the 50s and 60s, I only knew two festive meals: one in the spring, cooked by *Abuela* Fani and one in the fall cooked by *Abuela* Clara. We greeted each other with a “*gut iur*” or “*gut iontef*”, and then we ate. In those days I never saw a *haggadah* or a *khearah*, much less a *hannukiah*.

Years later, after finishing my architecture studies my career started in New York, and I was living in a city where Jewish holidays have great visibility. Not only do apartment windows, office buildings and stores display *hannukiot*, but everybody wishes you a *Hag Sameach*. Even the Empire State Building is lit blue and white for the occasion! And my best friend made sure I received a little gift for every one of the eight nights of *Hannukah*. So now I had learned that there was another holiday, but knew neither the meaning nor the point in celebrating it.

Time goes by, and several years later the office sent me to Barcelona to work on a project. And even before the building was completed I had decided to make this city my new home. After four years here I accepted an invitation to a *kabalat Shabbat*. It was my very first Jewish service, but not the last, as I participated Friday after Friday, and finally I joined this new congregation, the first Reform synagogue in Spain. Suddenly the year is full of holidays, with history, messages, interpretations and traditions. I never knew when they will occur until there was an announcement in the Jewish community newsletter. Not being used to following the Hebrew calendar, inevitably I would often miss a candle lighting one day or a professional lecture on another.

Unlike New York City, Spain does not display anything “Jewish” on the streets. You cannot find a Jewish business, or a Jewish name on some sort of sign, not even an indication on the doors of any of the active synagogues. Jews began returning to Spain about a century ago, but we are now less than 1/1000 of the population. Though this may explain such absence from the public space, it puzzled me to observe that the same was true in the old Jewish quarter. This small neighborhood in the old part of town, known as *El Call*, is so loaded with history! This is the reason why I decided to give a Jewish voice to our storytelling, and for over a decade now I have been taking visitors on educational walks.

Some time ago in early December, when the sun was already down and I was in no rush to return home, I decided to take a stroll on those same streets by myself. Cold weather would not stop me and began to wonder with a wool scarf rolled around my neck and my hands in my pockets. I felt the need to try to capture, if I could, what the spirit of the season may have been back then. How was this holiday celebrated in the Middle Ages, when Jews were living here? There is archaeological evidence of it, fragments of little clay oil lamps found in excavations. Did children make them as they do today? Did they put the lights in the windows? How did they keep the oil from spilling?

It did not take much to travel back in time and, as I entered the *Carrer de la Font*, my mind started to wander. Here is where the well was and right next to it are the remains of the arch into the narrow alley ending at the *Sinagoga poca*. A turn on the *Carrer de la Volta* and then to the *Carrer de la Sinagoga Major*. I could see, even in the dark, traces of tiny windows in

some stone walls still there since the 14th century. Wasn't the butcher to the left, towards the entrance of the street? Yes! and the *Sinagoga Major* was right here, at the corner.



Though I already knew the neighborhood like the palm of my hand, I found it hard to find my way in the dim light. My next left turn led me to a doorway crowned with little colorful lights and I was intrigued. One, two three, four... I counted. And I counted again, ... blue, orange, purple, green... There were eight lights over that door! In a neighborhood with no Jewish life for so long, was it possible that someone was still celebrating *Hannukah* in *El Call*?

Getting closer to the door I could see an old woman with gray hair pulled up in a bun, a plaid apron with large pockets over her clothes. She was rearranging hundreds of *tchotchkes* piled on the shelving and tables. For a second I thought that she was one of my Russian *Bubbes* and I almost ran inside to get my *Hannukah* gift of the night.

But the embarrassment at my own naiveté and the confusion it created in me made me very anxious. I had to leave that neighborhood as fast as possible, and I moved on without stopping or letting anything else distract me on the way out. I doubled the pace, as if running away from a chasing vision, afraid that I would not find my way back that labyrinth of narrow alleys. A left turn on *Carrer Marlet*, up to *Sant Honorat* and then *Sant Sever*. Though not sure which direction to take, I quickly made a right turn up to *Carrer del Bisbe* and, almost running and breathless, arrived at *Plaça de la Catedral*.



I was finally back in the real world, and in the midst of the Christmas market. It was very comforting to know that year after year these stalls had been set up in that same square in preparation for this holiday.

After that episode I have returned to *El Call* day after day, with visitors or by myself. And when I turn that corner I always look for the doorway, hoping to see it in the light of the day and possibly explore what is beyond. But all I find is a rolled up shutter which, like many others in the neighborhood, had not been opened in a very long time and is now covered with graffiti.

To this day, I am not sure what I saw that night. In my efforts to connect with this place I wonder if it was not just a product of my imagination which I hoped could help me reconstruct the sometimes tangled history of my family that had brought me to Barcelona.