

YOU PRICK US BUT WE DO NOT BLEED.

I am walking in Venice on Shabbat morning towards the Jewish Ghetto trying to remember the concierge's directions. "Righteh, straighteh, over the bridgeh," but all the streets look the same and I fear I am lost. The light here is so bright my sunglasses don't seem to work and I shade my eyes with my palm squinting from the glare skipping over canals and cobbled pavements to read my map. In the distance I see the only cast-iron bridge in Venice, the one I have been told leads to the Ghetto Novo.

Once over the bridge, sculpture in relief hangs on the walls in the main square depicting scenes of Jews being shot by firing squads. Today the horror scenes have given way to an elegant Piazza dotted with fine Judaica shops nestled inside what once must have been Jewish homes that sell colourful Venetian glass Mezuzah cases and Menorahs.

Chabad Hassidim rush about looking like a bunch of Shylocks but this is not the Sixteenth century when Jews were only allowed to be money-lenders, today in the Ghetto, Jews lead free lives. There are three synagogues, a Yeshiva, a kosher restaurant and bakery. Shabbos is observed publicly and in full joyous form.

Next to the Vaporetto stop of Guglie, I sit down to eat with other Jewish travelers from Europe and the States at a long table that seats thirty, set with white table cloth ready for the *Shabbos* meal. I recognize the lady on my left from the service at the ornate ancient synagogue where I prayed this morning, the very same *shul* where Al Pacino davened *kabbalat Shabbat* in Michael Radford's superb rendering of 'A Merchant of Venice'.

"Did you hear Blair's speech yesterday on the news?" my neighbor asks. "Terrible wasn't it, calling Israel Palestine," I answer. "It's as if he doesn't recognize who we are." "I wish he could see this celebration and how much we really are on the map."

Trays of golden roast chickens and potatoes glistening with olive oil are served along with a variety of salads. Melodic *zmirot* fill the air to which the Hassidim dance. Yeshiva students and passing Gondoliers have formed a circle. Navy and white striped shirts and black silk coats twirl around in a blur. Now they are jumping in time to the rhythm, ribbons on straw boaters and side locks are flying in unison. Venetians and tourists step off the vaporetto and stand around to watch amazed by the festivities

The Lubavichers have no inhibitions. Their outreach mission goes far deeper than just giving out freebie meals. A Yeshiva student stands on a chair, faces the canal and gives a *Dvar Torah* about the portion of the week, conveying a message to those far from home, that being in exile is an opportunity to better ourselves.

I have never understood the traditional idea that we Jews should be 'a light unto the nations' until now. Knowing they are outsiders, the goyim curiously look onto the heavenly party and I sense their yearning to gatecrash. This is what we need to do, I think, be free with our sincerity, proud to keep our traditions, not assimilate and then be ignored by a British Prime Minister.

Only a five- minute walk from the Rialto Bridge where Antonio spat on Shylock's gabardine, we no longer need to ask the question, Hath not a Jew eyes, hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Here on this brilliant Venetian morning it is obvious that we have all of this and more - the light to bring Moshiach.