



THE IZMIR PROJECT

To rescue Ancient Synagogues
and Jewish Heritage



Project Overview

Ancient Synagogues & Jewish Heritage in the old city of Izmir

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Background

Izmir is the only city in the world in which an unusual cluster of synagogues bearing a typical architectural style dating from the 16th century are preserved. Some of these synagogues are adjacent to each other, creating an historical architectural complex which is unique in the world, and unknown even to the world Jewry

There is a real danger that some of these unique historic buildings will cave in completely, leading to the subsequent loss of this extraordinary architectural and religious Jewish heritage forever, unless major and urgent effort will be made to rescue these Jewish treasures.

Following the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1492, some of the refugees' descendants came to Izmir, and brought with them the Sephardic Jewish heritage, the Ladino (Jewdeco-spanish) language, and the Sephardic traditions of religion and worship which is expressed in their Synagogues. The old Synagogues of Izmir are characterized by a central Stage which is an elevated platform where the service is conducted and upon which the "Torah" (the most holy Jewish book) is read. The Stage is placed across the holy Ark which is a cupboard where the scrolls of the holy Torah are kept at the eastern wall of the prayer hall. The central platform is supported by four pillars that form, in the center of the prayer hall, a kind of canopy built at the ceiling. The sitting arrangement, as a circle around the stage, allows the congregation to see the faces of one another, thus creating a bonding experience in public prayer, as opposed to the architectural style at those Ashkenazi synagogues influenced by the churches' architectural style, where worshippers sit in rows with no eye contact between them.

Of 34 magnificent synagogues built in previous centuries in Izmir, in that typical local architectural style, only 9 remain today around the market area in the old city of Izmir. Some in ruins with collapsed ceilings and walls, their contents disintegrating, and some preserved. These synagogues constitute a living testimony to the history of the Jewish community in Izmir, which was a spiritual Jewish-center, and one of the most spectacular of its kind that had the most spiritual and cultural influence on Jewish life at all the Jewish diaspora communities in the 17th and 18th centuries.

It is our privilege to present here these Synagogues:



RUINED SYNAGOGUES
FOR RECONSTRUCTION
AND RESTORATION

Ruined Synagogues for reconstruction and Restoration

Hevra Synagogue



Hevra Synagogue today



Hevra Synagogue before it collapsed

Ruined Synagogues for reconstruction and Restoration

Hevra Synagogue



This synagogue, also known as the “Talmud Torah”, was probably founded in early 17th century during the time of Rabbi Yosef Escapa. It is situated within the complex of four adjacent synagogues at the market place in Izmir, where for many generations was the heart of the Jewish quarter in Izmir in which most Jews lived until recently. The synagogue was ruined by fire and renovated several times, went out of use after its ceiling collapsed and was destroyed. In the past, it was considered one of the most beautiful buildings in Izmir, but it’s hard to notice that in its current state.

However, it is still possible to see within the ruins, the remains of the handsome Stage and the beautiful holy Ark. The synagogue had a small religious school which itself resembled a synagogue. These schools, which were usually located in the foyer leading to the prayer hall, served as small prayer houses, as well as places for the study of the Torah. In year 2000, planning institutions proposed plans for renovating the synagogue, but they were not realized.

Ruined Synagogues for reconstruction and Restoration

Etz Ha-Hayim Synagogue



The name “tree of life” was widely used for synagogues in Greek speaking communities in the area of the ottoman empire since the Byzantine Empire, centuries before the immigration of Spanish Jews came to Izmir. The name indicates the ancient history of the synagogue, possibly going back to the 14th or the 15th century.

Researchers believe that the synagogue was one of the six communities that existed in Izmir. It is a beautiful and unique synagogue. The prayer hall is one floor up and the entrance to it is through a hallway that was used in the past as a small religious school. The center of the hall is dominated by four original pillars that in the past surrounded the Stage and reached the ceiling in an impressive structure. Various holy verses adorn the ceiling of the Stage and the synagogue hall. The holy Ark is surrounded by a handsome wooden structure to which two additional stages, each on one side, were added at a later period.

Ruined Synagogues for reconstruction and Restoration

Etz Ha-Hayim Synagogue



This synagogue also suffered over the years from natural disasters and went through many changes. Today the physical condition of the synagogue requires strict preservation. According to the tradition, Moslems who arrived in Izmir at the 14th and 15th century used this synagogue for prayer because of the absence of mosques in the city.

Ruined Synagogues for reconstruction and Restoration

Los Foresteros – Kadosh Synagogue



Los Foresteros Synagogue, also called 'Orahim', is also located in the heart of the historic Jewish quarter, today at the main market area in Izmir. The synagogue was probably built in the 17th century and was active until it was destroyed by fire a few decades ago, and today only the outer walls remain.

The synagogue has two names. Its Hebrew name was 'Kadosh', and in Spanish 'Foresteros', meaning 'foreigners' or 'guests', indicating that it served new Jewish immigrants who came to Izmir and joined the local Jewish community. After it was destroyed and ceased to function as a synagogue, its courtyard was used as a kosher poultry slaughterhouse, in which atonement ceremonies were held before Yom Kippur.

Ruined Synagogues for reconstruction and Restoration

Portugal Synagogue



This is one of the first six communities established in Izmir, possibly of the early in 17th century, and most probably it was one of the six synagogues that already existed in 1621 during the time of Rabbi Escapa in Izmir. Its name indicates that many of its founders were Marranos who fled from the chains of the Inquisition in Portugal and returned to Judaism in the Ottoman Empire.

The synagogue includes an impressive gate made of marble columns and a pediment. Since its establishment, the synagogue went through many changes and was destroyed due to various natural disasters. In 1665, when Sabbatai Zvi was active in the city, the synagogue was at the heart of events associated with Sabbatai Zvi, who led a messianic movement which swept large parts of the Jewish world. Three walls and the impressive marble gate still remain from the original building which was burnt down in 1964.

Ruined Jewish Building for reconstruction and restoration

Hahamhane Rabbinical House



The Rabbinical Building was built in the 19th century with the support of the Rothschild family of Vienna. It included an important religious library and a religious school which continued to operate until the thirties of the 20th century. Like most synagogues in the Ottoman Empire, the Rabbinate is surrounded by a wall and a gate, and around it there was a large beautiful garden which was well maintained in the past. The Rabbinical Building served all the needs of the Jewish community in Izmir, which was one of the most important within Ottoman borders, and even beyond them.

This community was known at the 17th and 18th centuries as a religious center where many widely known scholars and rabbis like Rabbi Yosef Escapa, Rabbi Haim Benveniste, Rabbi Haim Palacci and others were active and well known, as Izmir was at that time, one of the most important Hebrew-printing center for holy books and Jewish law. The Jewish community in Izmir was divided into several congregations each led by a Torah teacher, and the community as a whole was led by the chief Rabbi, whose place of residence and work was at the Rabbinical Building. Today the building is closed due to its condition, and it cannot be visited because of safety reasons. Due to its unique architecture, the Municipality of Konak has prepared a plan to renovate and reconstruct the building as a structure for preservation.



SYNAGOGUES
DESTINED FOR
CONSERVATION

Synagogues destined for conservation

Shalom (Sephardic) Synagogue



Shalom Synagogue was one of the first communities active in Izmir and was probably founded in the 17th century. A small courtyard with a “sukkah” leads to the synagogue, and the roof of the sukkah is decorated with a crown, a unique decoration unknown from elsewhere. The synagogue has an unusual structure, with benches adjacent to the walls, the holy Ark on the eastern wall, and two smaller cabinets on each side, while the artistic amazing stage is adjacent to the opposite wall.

However it is apparent that in the past, the Stage used to stand at the center of the hall, inside a frame made of four pillars, and it was only later that it was moved to the back wall. Two staircases lead to the impressive Stage made of carved wood. The unusual old ceiling is made of carved wood, and painted in the way they use to paint old Turkish houses.

The synagogue has undergone many changes over the years, but unlike the other synagogues and many houses in the Jewish quarter, it was miraculously saved from the great fire of 1841, when the fire stopped just before the entrance to the synagogue. Installed at the front of the synagogue, there is an old marble tablet, depicting in Hebrew the history of the synagogue during the great fire.

Synagogues destined for conservation

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Shalom (Ashkenazi) Synagogue



Adjacent to Shalom Synagogue, there is a structure whose entrance was through Shalom Synagogue, that used to be the Ashkenazi Synagogue and was ruined at the beginning of the 20th century. The opening in the courtyard that led to Ashkenazi Synagogue can still be seen today.

Ashkenazi Jews (from the communities of eastern and central Europe), who emigrated to the Ottoman Empire already in the 15th century used to pray in a different style from Sephardic Jews.

However, after the expulsion from Spain, when most communities in the Ottoman Empire were Spanish-speaking, most Ashkenazi Jews were assimilated among them. But like in Izmir, Ashkenazi communities were also found in other large cities. In late 19th century, another immigration wave of Ashkenazi Jews came to Izmir and this synagogue served them.

Synagogues destined for conservation:

Algazi Synagogue



Algazi Synagogue, located at the heart of the ancient complex of synagogues in the market place in Izmir, is one of the most beautiful of its kind in the city. It is associated with the Algazi family, who was a well known family of poets and rabbis in Izmir. This synagogue also suffered from ravages of time and nature and was renovated several times.

Synagogues destined for conservation:

Algazi Synagogue



The synagogue was built in 1724 and since then has been renovated several times. The synagogue hall is large and illuminated with many windows, and it is decorated in white and blue, which add much glory to the place. In the center of the hall, there is a canopy-like structure supported by four pillars coming down from the ceiling and surrounding the wide and large Stage. In the eastern wall there is a central and relatively modest holy Ark, with two smaller cabinets on both sides. There is no gallery for women.

Local tradition tells that during a Yom Kippur prayer, the cantor winked at a woman sitting at the women's gallery, and the women's gallery was permanently closed to prevent such a case to happen again.

Synagogues destined for conservation:

Bikur Holim Synagogue



Bikur Holim Synagogue was founded in 1724 by Shlomo de Chaves, who donated the building to the community for use as a synagogue. The name of the synagogue 'Bikur Holim' was given to it when the basement of the building was converted to a hospital during the cholera plague that struck the city. The synagogue was burnt twice in the 18th century, and descendants of de Chaves renovated it every time.

The synagogue is considered of the most beautiful of its kind in the city. This synagogue is also surrounded by a wall and a gate, and the entrance to the prayer hall is through a small religious school with a small stage and a holy Ark of its own.

Synagogues destined for conservation:

Bikur Holim Synagogue



In the center of the prayer hall, there is an amazing elevated Stage and attached benches around it. The main Stage has columns supporting the ceiling of the synagogue, giving it a monumental character. The ceiling is unique and decorated with geometric flower and fruit designs that give the synagogue a distinctive and unusual character. The holy Ark is relatively modest and like in other synagogues in Izmir, is situated between two smaller cabinets. The basement of the synagogue served various purposes over the years, including a prison for judgments of the community Court, which enjoyed legal autonomy in the Ottoman Empire.

Synagogues destined for conservation:

Sinyora-Geveret Synagogue



This synagogue is also part of the compound of synagogues located today in the central market place. According to local tradition, the synagogue was built in the sixties of the 17th century, but since then has gone through far-reaching changes, constructions, and many renovations.

Its structure is a beautiful gem, with an entrance through an iron gate, hiding behind it a lovely garden leading to the upper women's gallery at the synagogue. The hall is large and spacious, decorated with old and unique paintings of landscape. Apparently, the Stage used to be in the center of the hall under a canopy structure and ornate columns. But like other synagogues in Izmir, the ark was moved to the front near the holy chest. The meaning of its name is uncertain.

Synagogues destined for conservation:

Sinyora-Geveret Synagogue



Local tradition tells that Donna Gracia, a very wealthy philanthropist lady who was active all over Europe in turning the Marranos back to Judaism, and was also known as 'seniora', founded the synagogue, and it was named after her. Another hypothesis says that a different 'seniora' who immigrated to Israel rented her house for use as a synagogue, and the rent payments provided for her livelihood in the Holy Land.



SYNAGOGUE
UNDER CURRENT
RESTORATION

Synagogue under current restoration

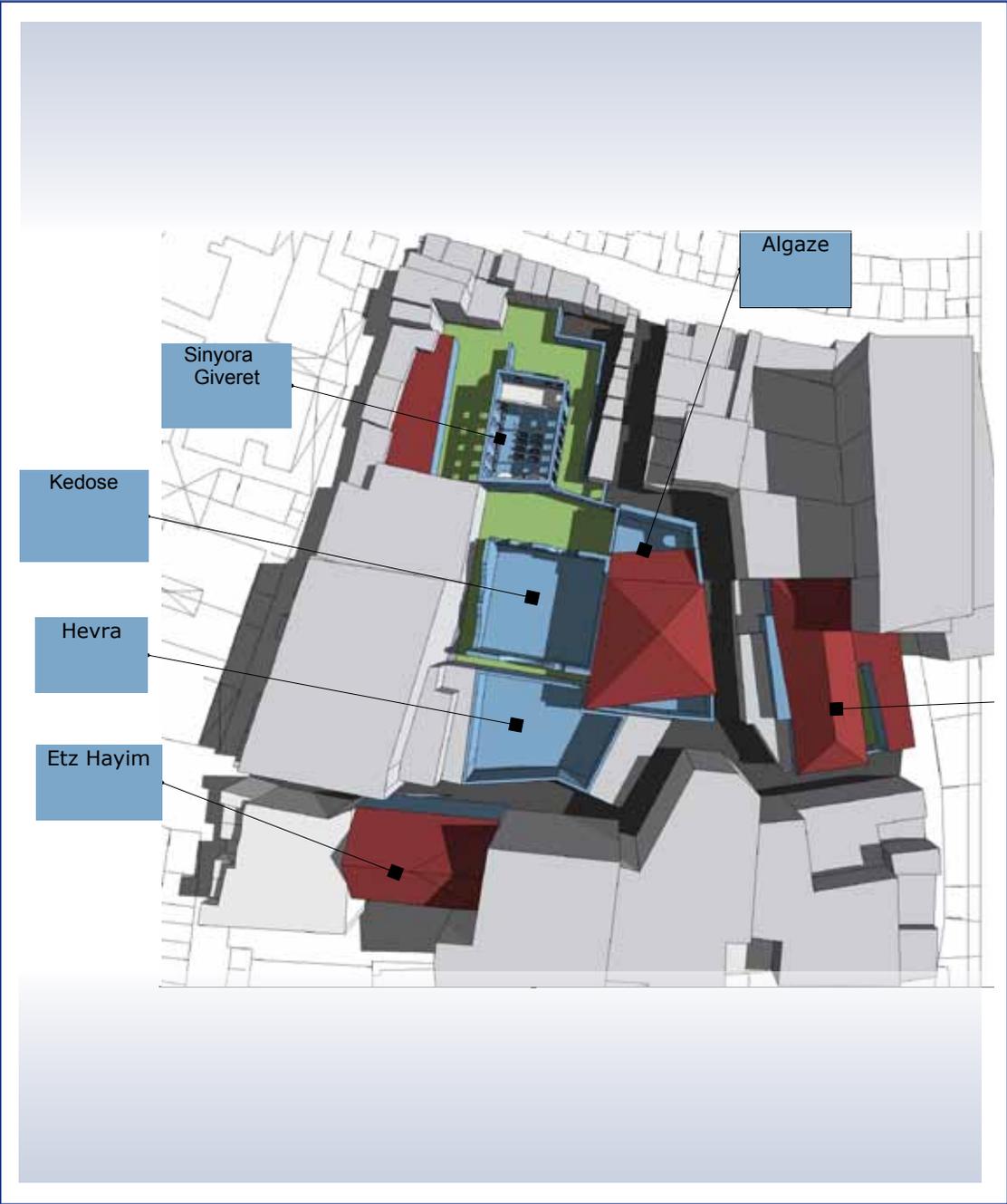
Beit Hillel Synagogue



This building served in the past as the home of the Palacci family, a family of famous rabbis who were active in Izmir. The synagogue was founded in 1840 by the Palacci family. Rabbi Haim Palacci and his son, Rabbi Avraham Palacci led the community for many years. In the 19th century, Rabbi Avraham Palacci founded in his home a synagogue named Beit Hillel, after the philanthropist from Bucharest who supported the publication of Rabbi Pallacci's books. However, the name "Avraham Palacci Synagogue" was also used by the community.

The synagogue also served as a religious school, but it was destroyed after its roof collapsed and is now reconstructed and restored by the Izmir Municipality in order to become a Museum of Rabbi Hyim Palacci.

The Old Synagogues layout





THE IZMIR PROJECT



“The Izmir Project” - Cultural Journey & Dialogue

The Izmir Project” was initiated by Mrs. Kiriaty Matalon and the Kiriaty foundation that supports cultural and educational activities.

When Mrs. Kiriaty visited Izmir few years ago, she was introduced to the oldest synagogues of the city, built by the descendants of Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal. These deportees were welcomed and treated exceptionally well first by Sultan Beyazit II and then by the Ottoman rulers throughout history. Mrs. Kiriaty was amazed by the synagogues beauty & unique architecture, and understood their historical importance. But on the same time she became very sad by the deteriorating condition of some of these Synagogues. These historically important monuments tell the story of the Jewish community who brought to Izmir the Spanish Jewish cultural heritage, as well as the story of the city of Izmir that from early stage was a multicultural city, where Muslims lived side by side, in harmony with Christians and Jews.

The Project vision was to restore and conserve the old Synagogues, and save them from complete ruin; establish in the Synagogues site a Jewish Museum that will tell the story of the Izmir Jewish community and the reach Sephardic Jewish heritage they brought with them, in a way similar to the Jewish Museums of Prague and Krakow.

Realizing this, Mrs. Kiriaty first approached Mr. Jack Kaya, the president of the Jewish Community, and the Mayor of the city with the idea of initiating, Izmir Synagogues Conservation Project that will turn them in to a Jewish Museum. After having their approval she asked the Kiriaty Foundation board members to support this endeavor as an international project, that will spread this idea worldwide.

An advisory academic team for the “Izmir project” was formed from various disciplines of: History, Judaic, Art, Architecture and Conservation, with the idea to establish a Jewish Museum in the Synagogues site. This seemed as the only possible way to save these Synagogues and their heritage. An executive, operating team was formed as well by the Kiriaty Foundation, and is working to position and promote this project by creating relations with potential donors as well as philanthropic foundations for Jewish Heritage worldwide.

The Jewish community in Izmir took in addition an important step by establishing the “Izmir Sephardic Cultural Heritage Association” and delegated to this Association the powers to be the executing body to preserve the synagogues, to prepare them for visitors, and to establish the Jewish museum and manage it.



Why Izmir Project?

Apparently, Izmir is home to the only complex in the world of adjacent ancient synagogues constructed in a unique Sephardic architectural style dating from the 16th century. Of the 34 synagogues built in Izmir, just 13 remained in Izmir, 9 of them in the old city.

Those few synagogues which are still active today are in good shape and stand as an example of various architectural styles; Italian with some Basilica elements, and mainly Golden Age of Spain.

A living monument to a once prospering Jewish community. Unfortunately, most of the remained synagogues are in poor condition or ruins, with collapsed ceilings and walls, and their contents disintegrating.

This whole site tells an epic story of the Jews deportation from Spain, and the journey of their descendents to establish new communities elsewhere within the Ottoman Empire.

It was obvious that without serious and quick intervention, these Synagogues will decline and unfortunately will disappear from the City cultural history forever.

The Kiriaty Foundation with the consent of Jewish community started to donate the seed money for establishing the infrastructure needed for the “Izmir Project” to focus on the conservation and restoration of the ancient synagogues in Izmir in order to establish a visitor’s site and a Jewish heritage museum in Izmir, including a research center for **inter-cultural dialogue**.

The purpose of the project is to save the synagogues that are in a deteriorating condition and restore those who are already destroyed.

The Kiriaty Foundation and the Jewish community intentions are to save the buildings, and create within their space an open Museum , devoted to the history & cultural life of the Synagogues and the Izmir Jewish community , during the last 5 centuries and to bring into the global awareness the story of the expulsion from Spain and the integration of the deportees descendents in the Ottoman Empire; maintain awareness of the unique Ladino language and culture, as well as the unique Spanish-Ottoman architecture that developed within the Jewish community in Izmir; **Present to the non-Jewish population in general , the Jewish culture, its values with emphasis on encouraging tolerance toward minority cultures, which was a traditional characteristic of Izmir society in past centuries leaving a legacy of human tolerance for future generations.**



Recent Developments & future challenges

In recent years a number of steps were taken to promote this project:

- The Izmir Project was accepted as member of the AEJM: the European Association of Jewish Museums.
- Conservation of the Jewish textile collection (ark- curtains, coats of Torah Scrolls), including approximately 140 Judaic textile-items that were found in the old Synagogues. These items tell the life- stories of the Jewish community and the influence of Ottoman art on Judaic ritual art. Conservation, documentation and cataloging of this collection, has been carried out lately, by the Textile Conservation Department staff of Helsinki University.
- A successful effort was made by the Jewish community leadership to register the Izmir’s synagogues on the name of the Jewish community with the decision of the Turkish government to allow the Jewish community to take ownership of these assets formally under Turkish law. These actions paved the way and allowed to submit applications for restoration and preservation permits, for these synagogues.
- Reconstruction-actions of Beit Hillel Synagogue are currently carried out by Izmir-Municipality , in order to turn it into a small museum dedicated to the life and work of the famous Rabbi Hayim Palacci
- Rescue operations were taken to prevent the floor of Etz Hayim Synagogue from collapse, and to strengthen the foundations and Basement of Algazi Synagogue.

Yet many additional challenges are facing this multi-dimensional project:

- Rescue and preserve the old books collection that was previously kept in the library of “Haham Hanne” old Rabbinical-House, a rare collection of 2000 ancient books in Hebrew and Ladino written by famous Rabbis, including many centuries-old religious books.

Restoration of “Orchim-Kadosh “ (Foresteros) Synagogue ruins, in order to turn it to the future center of the Jewish Museum.

To complete the restoration and preservation work of Etz-Hayim Synagogue, according the plans started on the end of 2013.

Opening the Synagogues sites to visitors. For this purpose an initiative by Kiriaty foundation was taking place for a special seminar dedicated to local tour guides about the Synagogues History, was held by Yad Ben Zvi institute on March 2014 in Izmir.



Establishing Jewish Museum in Izmir within the complex of the ancient Synagogue site, will undoubtedly be not only a cultural and historical effort documenting the history of Jews in the city, but will also serve as an important tourist site in the city that will attract many tourists and travelers, Jews and non-Jews, from around the world; and above all will serve to promote better understanding Jewish culture by Izmir Muslim society.

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