

# Saving the Historic Hevra Synagogue of Izmir

## A Case for Support



**THE IZMIR PROJECT**  
A Dialog And Cultural Journey

**A Ruined Synagogue for Reconstruction & Restoration**



**Hevra Synagogue after it collapsed**



**Hevra Synagogue before it collapsed**

# Hevra Synagogue



## History of Hevra Synagogue

Hevra Synagogue was one of first six synagogues that were established in Izmir, by the descendants of the Jews who were expelled from Spain and arrive in Izmir in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was probably founded in early 17<sup>th</sup> century during the time of Rabbi Yosef Escapa.

Reading ancient texts, this Synagogue was destroyed by fires and was rebuild several times. Following the big fire of September 1838, it was restored by the brother: Celebi and Menahem Hacez, only to be burnt once again in August 1841.

This synagogue, also known in the past as "Hevrat Talmud Torah" (teaching Torah company). Teaching & Learning Torah was the most important activity in Jewish communities' life in past centuries.

This name indicates **the importance of this Synagogue which became the main Synagogue of the Izmir Jewish community, where the chief rabbis taught Torah and preached to their congregation.**

Therefor many efforts were invested in decorating this Synagogue, which was known as the most beautiful among Izmir's synagogues in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, until its ceiling collapsed in the big fire of Izmir.

## Description of the Building

Hevra Synagogue is one of the earliest synagogues built by the descendants of Jews who were expelled from Spain, and brought with them to Izmir their Synagogues' architectural style that existed in Spain many centuries ago.

The "Triple Ehal" (Holy Ark with two sided cupboards), the "Tevah" (The elevated stage where the Tora is read) which resembles the prow of a galley, and the "Beit-Midrash", once made it an extremely beautiful Synagogue.

In the past, it was considered one of the most beautiful buildings in Izmir, but it's hard to notice this in its current state.

However, it is still possible to see within its ruins, the remains of the beautiful Stage and the amazing holy Ark. The Synagogue had a small 'Beit- Midrash'(a religious school) which in itself resembled a small synagogue.

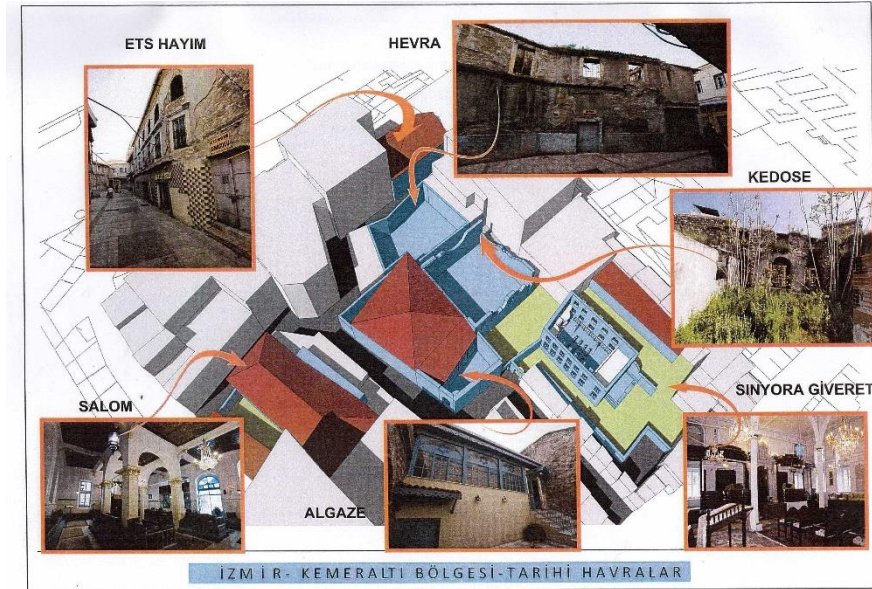
These schools, which were usually located in the foyer, leading to the main prayer hall, served also as small prayer space, as well as places for the study of the Torah. In year 2000, planning institutions proposed plans for renovating the synagogue, but they were not realized.



## Location

Hevra synagogue is a part of nine synagogues' complex, of which six of them are adjacent to each other, and all together form a unique quarter of synagogues.

All of them are situated in the heart of the old Bazar (Market place), in Kemeralti area at the old town of Izmir, where for many generations was the heart of the Jewish quarter of Izmir, in which most Jews lived in past centuries.



## Current condition of the six synagogues complex



## Plans of the six synagogues future visitors center

## Hevra Synagogue - Current Situation

Over the years the Synagogue has suffered from natural disasters, its ceiling collapsed many years ago and it has gone through many changes. Today the Synagogue is almost in a complete state of ruin, following the collapse of the roof in 1996.

The ' Beit Midrash' (school) at the Entrance of the Synagogues was also destroyed. Only the four walls of the main prayer hall with remnant of the Holly Ark remained half ruined. Most of the walls and the beautiful wall-paintings were damaged.

Yet, since the plans and documentation of the Synagogue that was done in year 2000, are in hand, it is still possible to restore this originally beautiful and important Synagogue and renovate it to its original condition.



The Synagogue had in the past a beautiful courtyard, that was filled up during the years with shops. These shops probably will need to be removed during the restoration work in order to reveal the Synagogue's beautiful original courtyard.

## The Izmir Project

This complex of synagogues is unique in the world. It is the only place that presents the preserved glory of the Spanish synagogues' architectural style. This immensely important tangible Jewish history allows us to experience all aspects of Jewish life in Spain prior to the deportation. These magnificent treasures were created in past centuries when most of the times Jews, Muslims and Christians lived in harmony together. This is an important message of tolerance and hope for future generations.

### The Aims of the Izmir Project are:

- To turn this cluster of historic synagogues into a Jewish Heritage visitors center.
- To preserve and present the history of the Jewish community in Izmir.
- To preserve and present the Sephardic cultural and historical heritage, of the Jews who were deported from Spain & Portugal and were prosecuted by the Catholic Inquisition.
- To present the mutual influence that Jews, Muslim and Christian cultures had on each other and on the development of the city during the reign of the Ottoman Empire.
- To present the acceptance of Jews who were invited by the Ottomans to settle in the Empire where they could worship freely their religion, after they were expelled from Spain & Portugal because of their religion.
- All these are examples of the **inter-cultural dialogue existed in Izmir in past centuries, and as a legacy of tolerance and acceptance of minorities for future generation.**



**THE IZMIR PROJECT**  
A Dialog And Cultural Journey

**Rescue an extraordinary architectural Heritage in Izmir**

The only complex in the world of adjacent synagogues constructed in a unique Sephardic architectural style, dating from the 16th century, built by Jews following their expulsion from Spain in 1492.

Of the 34 synagogues, just 13 remain, some in poor condition or ruins, with collapsed ceilings and walls, their contents disintegrating.

There is real danger that some of these buildings will cave in completely, leading to the subsequent loss of this extraordinary architectural heritage, forever.

The Izmir Project, initiated by the Kiriaty Foundation and the Jewish community of Izmir with the support of the local Municipality, will restore most of the synagogues within the historic Jewish Quarter, returning their architectural elements and interiors to their former glory. This project is being undertaken out of recognition of the profound importance of this collection to Jewish and Turkish history, as well as to the conservation of art throughout the world.

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New York short video -  
search: The Izmir Project

ICC 2013 Israel Council  
Conservation and the  
Jewish Communities

## The basis for the initiation the Izmir Project

1. The declaration of all nine ancient synagogues in the old town of Izmir, by the : WORLD MONUMENTS WATCH as : "**Historical endangered sites of international cultural Heritag**".
2. The outcome of 'Izmir Jewish heritage' accademic research made by Avi-Chay Foundation that was sponsored by ICOMOS, states that: "**an international interfirance is needed to rescue this rare cultural heritage**".

## The Izmir Project major acheivments & chalenges

- Two ruined syangogues ( out of nine) : Beit Hillel Synagogue, and Portugal Synagogue, were latley restored and preserved .
- These days, a major restoration and preservation work is taking place on Etz-Hayim Synagogue.
- Two ruined synagogues that still remain to be restored and conserved are: Hevra Synagogue and Foresteros Synaganogue. Both of them are located at the heart of the synagogues complex where the Future Jewish Museum is planed to be established.
- Once all the synagogues will be restored and conserved , they will turn together into one complex of the Izmir Jewish Heritage & Cultural visitors center.
- Arch. Daniel Libeskind, a world renound architect who built monumental buildings and insituitions all around the globe and also designed the outstanding Berlin Jewish Museum, visited recently, the Izmir historic Synagogues site , and expressed his interest to plan the Izmir Jewish Museum and visitors center.

## The Izmir Project's Partners

- The Jewish community of Izmir
- The Kiriaty Foundation
- The Izmir Municipality
- The Turkish Committee for the Preservation of Historic Buildings
- TARKEM – the ssociation for development of Izmir old city
- A.E.J.M ( the Association of Uropean Jewish Museums)
- Foundation for Jewish Heritage ( based in London )

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### **The Kiriaty Foundation int.**

*The "Izmir Project" was initiated by Ms. Judith Kiriaty Matalon and the Kiriaty Foundation which supports cultural and educational activities. The Foundation recognizes the beauty & unique architecture, and the historical importance of Izmir's remarkable synagogues and Sephardic Jewish heritage. As a result, it became committed to ensuring this Jewish heritage future survival and its use in a way that celebrates the unique contribution of Sephardic culture to civilization (Jewish and non Jewish alike). By glorifying the cooperation and co-existence between all Izmir's past ethnic groups and religions (Muslims, Christians and Jews) to promote current inter-cultural dialogue between these ethnic groups and religion*



## Urgency in Saving Hevra synagogue

### challenges

The first and the most important & urgent challenge is to conduct immediate rescue work to stop the deterioration process of the Synagogue, saving the existing walls, the original holly-arc and the ancient wall paintings. Restore the Synagogue to its original condition.

The second challenge is to integrate the restored Synagogue into the wider Izmir Jewish Heritage visitors center.

### Progress to date

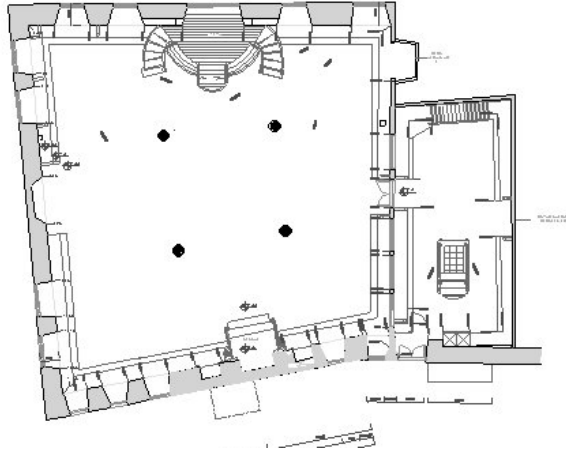
- The compound of historic synagogues has been confirmed in the Izmir city master plan as the future 'Jewish Museum of Izmir'.
- An architectural interim survey report of Hevra Synagogue was conducted in 2016 By Arch. Naor Mimar, who specialize in Synagogues' architecture conservation. (Pls. see following reports).
- In addition, a professional examination of the Synagogue's murals and wall inscriptions' condition was done by: 'Studio Tchelet', who is expert for rescuing ancient wall paintings.
- As a result of these surveys, a preparatory offer for, restitution and restoration plan of Hevra synagogue was done in May 2019 (Pls. see following offer), which make the planning work ready to start.



# Avi-Chay Foundation Survey's Findings & Conclusions

## Hevra Synagogue present condition

The building is dilapidated. There is no roof at all, the pillars have fallen down, the “Aron Kodesh” and the walls are in a very bad condition. The Synagogue is exposed to weather changes. Yet the “Beit Midrash” space is not completely destroyed.



The building is of masonry. The pillars, the roof, the ceiling, and the “Bimah” are made of wood. The floors are covered with ceramic tiles. It is not easy to recognize the unique elements in the synagogue, because of the bad condition of the building. Nevertheless, the main elements are:

1. Stained-glass windows.
2. Unique “Aron Kodesh”
3. Decorative ceramic tiles.



## Conclusions

- The roof does not exist
- Unique elements are exposed to weather changes.
- The pillars, floor, and walls are in very bad condition
- The gallery above the entrance space should be taken care of.

We can recommend that, before reconstructing this building, we must protect the special elements such as the “Bimah”, “Aron Kodesh” and other furniture by temporarily moving them to other spaces. If possible, a protective roof can be added in order to protect the walls and the interior of the building. The gallery should be supported by pillars.

## Interim architectural Report on Hevra Synagogue September 2016

### ***Hevra synagogue, a description of current situation and recommendations for urgent rescue work.***

Hevra Synagogue which is in a rundown physical condition for 20 years now, has recently become critical when only the external walls remained, which include the Haychalot Wall – Aron Hakodesh and the remains of the stage. In the other building's walls only parts of the structural elements remained including windows and decorated walls, arches and entrances in various states of preservation. In the inspection of the building we found that the Beit Midrash which flank the north of the building, which until two years ago was in worn situation has now completely collapsed. In diagnosis of Heychalot wall to the entry of the current site we observed cracks in the entire height of the wall comprising a fragment constructive endangers to the whole structure, my assessment is that: **This crack will worsen without taking urgent immediate rescue work to stabilize the walls of the building, preventing the penetration of rainwater to the top of the walls and especially for making defragmentation of crack and preventing its further expansion !**

Until future restoration of the Synagogue or any preservation activities will be made, here are my recommendations for a number of urgent preventive conservation activities:

- Implementation of defragmentation and repair of the Heychalot wall including examination by a specialist constructor, Implementing immediate solution includes support to prevent collapse and making 'Sewing' of the crack by filling with mortar (Bonding material) and stone for closing the gap and if necessary, installing anchors strengthening and stabilizing of the two parts of the walls.
- Making the installation of roof tops of the walls in one of two ways: installing temporary roof completely or partially off the walls, on the walls themselves or by helping temporarily by a supportive construction or alternatively sealing the tops of the walls with mortar (Bonding material), and the creation of water channels to drain excessive water (We should examine the possibility of binding parts of the wall to prevent water penetration in front of the wall)
- Performing cleaning and organization of the site including the removal of all residual building waste, the collection of architectural elements for future documentation and restoration and storing them near the site, protected from rain. Cleaning the surface and creating drainage of rainwater from the site into the municipal drainage system.

- Documentation of the rescue work which include making measurements (using laser) and complete photographic documentation of the internal facades of the building (currently there is no such documentation).
- The implementation of ongoing monitoring of the overall site including inspection every six months, of the walls condition of the building by an expert engineer for ongoing care hazards
- Documentation of the rescue work which include making measurements (using laser) and complete photographic documentation of the internal facades of the building (currently there is no such documentation).



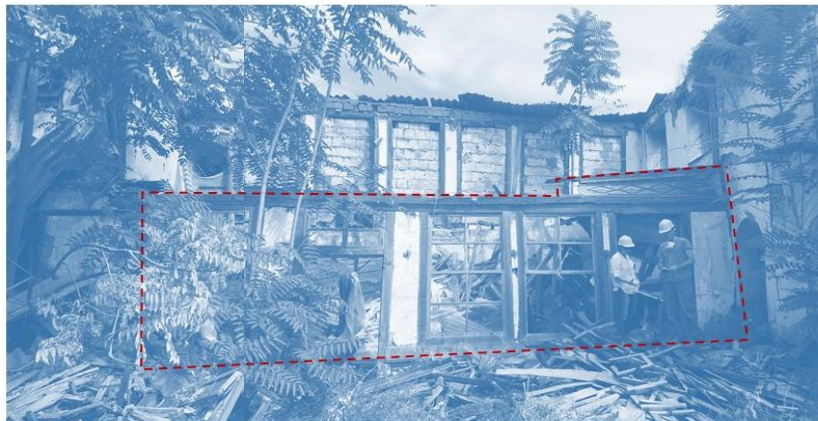
Photo of Haychalot wall including the remains of the Holy Ark, including details of the original entrances including windows and shutters, wall decorations and many other decorations in wood and drywall that are in critical condition.



Southern elevation which includes a deep niche which may have served as another entrance to the synagogue, the remains of entries with stained glass windows and original shutters, wall decorations include paintings, wood and drywall decorations.



The western facade of the synagogue has high niche that is a unique architectural element to this specific synagogue, the niche is decorated with rich detail.



North facade of the internal building structure which includes the ruins of the Beit Midrash (recently collapsed), in this photo decorated wooden partition (typical to Izmir synagogues such as Elgazi, Ets Haim, Bikur Holim) where it is tilted before the final collapse.



A look at the Heychalot wall including the northern entrance area, the photograph highlights the broken wall that extends from the top of the wall endangers the stability of the entire wall, the risk of fracture crack developing into building collapse is high.

*Architectural research conducted and edited by : Conservation Arch. Naor Mimar*

**THE PREPARATORY OFFER OF HEVRA SYNAGOGUE SURVEY,  
RESTITUTION AND RESTORATION PROJECTS**

plans were proposed for renovating the synagogue, but they were not realized. The structure of which has sufficient information and documents about its original structure will be reconstructed and it will function as a Jewish History Museum.

**Business steps:**

In order to be able to take a healthy building survey of the structure, we will perform a careful rubble cleaning here. It is observed that there are some pieces related to the original architectural elements of the building in this rubble stack.

Then we will prepare building survey, restitution and restoration project for building.

**1. Stage:**

The synagogue will be scanned with laser scanner and the data will be transferred to digital environment and drawing building survey. And then we will prepare analytic drawings containing information such as material authenticity,

**2. Stage:**

The prepared survey will be evaluated. We will present it to an art historian.

The restitution project will be improved by the help of his/her opinions.

**3. Stage**

The restoration project will be prepared according to building survey and restitution project. All interventions of building will be marked on the building survey sheets. All architectural study reports will be presented.

Additionally, this work will be followed by The Municipality and Cultural Heritage Conservation Board and any corrections and additional details will be required.

**4. Stage**

The original courtyard of the Synagogue will be revealed and restored after destroying the shops located in this courtyard.

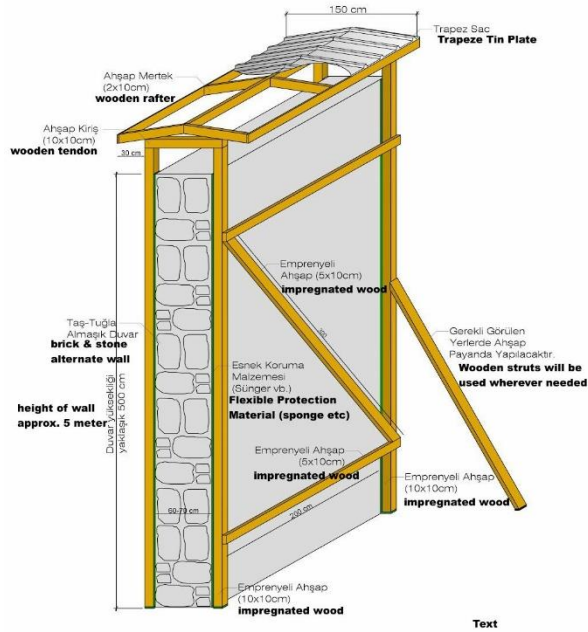
**Building Area (approximately)**

Ground Floor= 301 m<sup>2</sup>

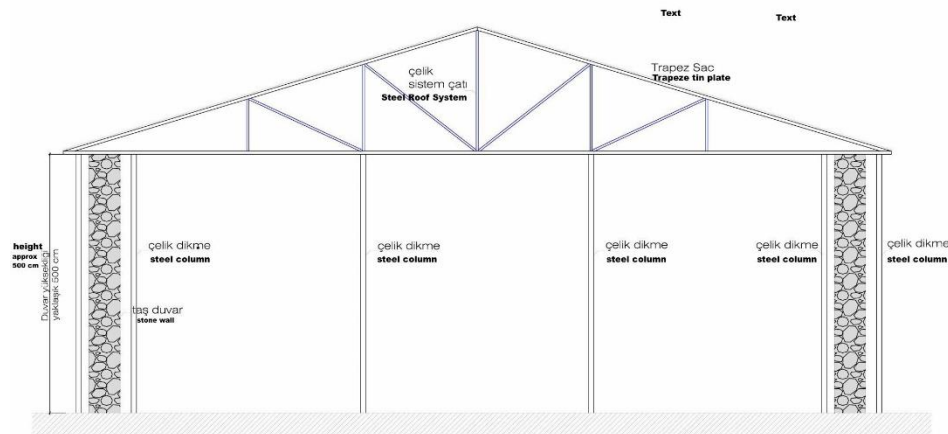
First Floor= 56 m<sup>2</sup>

Total Building Area = 357 m<sup>2</sup>

Two alternative of emergency rescue work & protection of the Syangogue walls and walls' decoration from further deterioration, until a complete restoration work will start.



Alternative 1



Alternative 2





The Foundation for Jewish Heritage expressed lately its impression of this Project :

**....."We were ehugely impressed with the Synagogues Project - its importance , its scale and its possibilities - with the potential to have a major impact on the city and way beyond".....**