

THE FOUR SEPHARDIC SYNAGOGUES
IN THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM¹

by

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When discussing the four Sephardic synagogues in the Old City of Jerusalem — among the oldest and most distinguished of the city — we are obliged to keep in mind the special status of Jerusalem in our people's consciousness. Because of her being a loadstone for Jewish travellers and pilgrims, the city became a meeting place and the source of information about all the events in the communities of the Diaspora, including, among others, news of developments in the field of synagogues. At the same time Jerusalem was the spiritual centre of both Christianity and Judaism, which brought about a two-way influence between houses of prayer in Jerusalem and similar buildings in the rest of the world.

Jewish Architecture

In the absence of original Jewish architecture, the Jews were obliged to choose between the Christian architectural viewpoint, emphasising the link with the altar in a horizontal direction and the yearning for the ineffable in a vertical one stressed by the point of the cross in the dome or any other heightening, and the Muslim architectural view which prefers an absence of mysticism or guiding of thought. From the second to the seventh century C. E. Jewish architecture used the basilica, but at the beginning of the Middle Ages there was a renewed desire to create an archetype of a building guiding thought but lacking mysticism, which would be fit for prayer as well as for study and as a meeting place.

"The House of Pillars", called today "the Ramban Synagogue" — even though there is no certainty that this was indeed the synagogue used by Ramban — consists of a two-colonnade hall, clearly opposed to the basilica with its three colonnades. This structure, the oldest of the synagogues known to us in the Old City, was chosen for a synagogue, as far as the evidence shows, at the end of the fourteenth century. It was suitable for congregational prayer, yet did not resemble a church. From Crusaders' testimony we

* In: *Qadmoniot*, Vol. V (1972), nrs. 3-4 (19-20), pp. 135-137.

Original Hebrew title: ארבעת בתי-הכנסת הספרדיים בירושלים העתיקה

¹ The four historic synagogues here described were destroyed by the Jordanian army in 1948 and were recently restored by the Israeli Government.

learn that at that time it was the only synagogue in the city. This synagogue served as an example for others in Jerusalem and some even claim it served as an example for certain synagogues in Europe.

In the course of the ages many Jews saw in the Dome of the Rock the original image of the Temple, as attested to in many naive illustrations from the Middle Ages. Because of this, and because of its imposing form, fit both for study and as a meeting place, it became a paragon for synagogues, houses of study and other Jewish public buildings both in Jerusalem and in European countries.

The above-mentioned Jewish architectural conception and the limited needs of the congregation due to its miserable condition gave rise to the architectural attitude reflected in the four Sephardic synagogues.

The Historical Background

In the year 1586 the House of Pillars was closed down finally by order of the governor of Jerusalem, Abu Seifin, and the Jews of Jerusalem were left without a synagogue in which to pray. In a letter from the year 1604, sent from the congregation of Safed to Algeria, we read, "In Jerusalem there are only very few people left, who are continually being attacked and do not even have a house of prayer to pray in". The decimated population evidently gathered in private homes for prayer, and only in the latter part of the first decade of the sixteenth century was the first Sephardic synagogue built.

In old times, when the House of Pillars was still in use, the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim used to pray together. Their form of prayer was a blending of the two usages. Yet Rabbi Moshe Bassolo remarks in 1522, "It is close to the Sephardic custom". A detailed description of this custom is given by Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura.

Now, however, when the Jews of Jerusalem decided to erect a new prayer house, the congregations separated. The Ashkenazim chose a site close to the House of Pillars and above it, which is the courtyard of the "Hurva" of today, while the Sephardim built their synagogue south of the ancient building. Since the Sephardim made up the majority of the old Yishuv of Eretz Israel, the focal point moved to the great Sephardic synagogue, *Kehilla Kedosha Granada*, today called "Rabban Yochanan ben-Zakkai". The site chosen to build the synagogue on was an abandoned area with remnants of Second Temple ruins which might testify to its importance in the past. Excavations conducted by Prof. N. Sluchts have uncovered beautiful marble columns of great age under the synagogue's floor. In 1821, when the Christian pilgrim John Carnay visited here, these columns still served as secondary support for the synagogue's ceiling. "The main place of prayer is a depressing and sorry-looking building to which one descends by steps. It is located in the Jewish Quarter and is supported somehow by ancient columns."

In the year 1625 the synagogue Yochanan ben-Zakkai and another adjacent building were already in existence, the second building serving as school and meeting-place. An anonymous tourist who visited here in that year writes, "There are only two synagogues here, one Ashkenazi and small, the other Sephardic and large, having next to it a big House of Study (*beit midrash*), where they go from strength to strength, and in both they pray and it is their meeting place." Thus, until the beginning of the eighteenth century the Jews had only two synagogues, but in the course of time the community grew and the second Sephardic building was turned from a House of Study into a synagogue, which was later called "The Prophet Elijah".

In a letter reporting the arrival of Abraham Revigo and his group in the year 1702 we read, "It is the custom that the *Parnasim* and *Gabbayim* bring an offering of perfume and wine, a very worthy present and invite him and call him (R. Abraham Revigo) to go to their synagogue [meaning the Yochanan ben-Zakkai synagogue. D. C.], and thus the leaders of the House of Study synagogue do on the second Sabbath and on the third the Ashkenazi synagogue." From this it can be concluded that in that year there were no other synagogues than the two Sephardic ones and the Ashkenazi one in the courtyard of the Hurva. In their regulations of 1842 (nr. 60-61) the Sephardim write that the regulation in the matter of the offerings still exists, but that two new Sephardic synagogues have been added. Other sources from the same time confirm this. Rabbi Yehosef Schwartz, who visited Jerusalem in 1837, reports briefly the addition of two synagogues: "... and in the course of time, with the community growing and the two congregations being too small to contain everyone, they added unto them and made another synagogue in the courtyard of the former two, and this was a small congregation, a 'Middle synagogue'. And about twenty years after the Middle synagogue was built, they built another one in the courtyard, and this is the 'Istanbul synagogue'."

In the year 1790 there were already four congregations. All four synagogues were very old and dilapidated. Yehosef Schwartz adds, "When there was rain, the synagogues could not be used for they were covered with old and wet boards and the government would not consent to have them repaired. And in the year 1835 the Egyptian ruler Muhammed Ali allowed them to be rebuilt, and so it was done and today they are beautiful buildings." If in the year 1790 all the synagogues were "very old and dilapidated" it may be assumed that they had been finished at least fifty years previously. It is possible to fix the dates of construction of the four Sephardic synagogues thus:

Rabban Yochanan ben-Zakkai	about 1606 - 1610
Elijah the Prophet	about 1615 - 1625
The Middle one	about 1702 - 1720
The Istanbuli	about 1740

We have seen therefore that the synagogues were built in two stages: first Yochanan ben-Zakkai and Elijah the Prophet, which stood on the site of the old House of Pillars, whereas the Middle synagogue and the Istanbuli were built at the beginning of the eighteenth century after the influx of immigrants to Jerusalem in the wake of Sabbateanism.

In the year 1835 the four synagogues were repaired. It was the year of Muhammed Ali's return to Jerusalem after the suppression of the Falachin's rebellion, meaning that the reconstruction of the synagogues was finished in the same year that permission for it was given. The speed with which they were repaired testifies to the fact that what was replaced was mainly the wooden ceiling and the roof-tiles. They were replaced by sturdier ceilings of stone cupolas and crossed vaults. Had the repairs been more thorough it would have been impossible to finish them in such a short time. As for the Yochanan ben-Zakkai synagogue, it seems that it underwent a drastic change, including the removal of the ancient pillars which supported the wooden roof, and a broadening of the roof span over the whole synagogue. This change involved a thickening of the walls, adding further supports and reinforcing the foundations — and here too we have evidence.

Let us now briefly inspect the formal components of each of the four synagogues.

The Yochanan ben-Zakkai Synagogue

This synagogue was clearly built under the influence of the House of Pillars. In the beginning it probably had central pillars and a wooden ceiling, and in the eastern wall two holy arks, as in the ancient synagogue. A wooden ceiling was easier to execute and more practical in the prevailing condition of stress of those days. It is also characteristic of ceilings for buildings of similar size in the country of origin of the majority of Jews in Palestine of that time — Asiatic and European Turkey. The building was initially intended for a synagogue and it therefore faces east. During the restoration of 1835 the central pillars were removed and the lengthwise supporting walls were fortified by strong buttresses. The two-part holy ark is therefore the only remnant of the ancient two-colonnade building. There was no women's section, and when attending prayers the women most likely used the house of study, i. e. the present Elijah the Prophet synagogue. The seating arrangement was as is common in the Sephardic community: the *bimah* (pulpit) being considerably higher than the congregation and placed in the middle of the synagogue. There has been no change in this arrangement from the earliest construction of the synagogue until 1948. The replacement of the wooden ceiling by a stone crossed vault does not testify to any particular style — it was a mixture of Crusaders' halls and oriental-style large buildings of the period.

Elijah the Prophet Synagogue

This building had earlier served as a house of study, which explains to a large extent its centralised character. However, the influence of the Dome of the Rock is greatly felt due to the development of architectural thought as to the planning of places of worship. One may assume that in spite of the centralised hall it had pillars for secondary use which carried the wooden ceiling and were therefore much thinner than the present-day pillars. It seems that the building had been much taller and that only later, when it was turned into a synagogue and was roofed with a stone cupola, was its floor raised to the present level and the pillars thickened into firm supports, carrying arches to sustain the cupola. Thus the building was turned into a comparatively low one, the centre of which is under the dome. This change shows clearly the influence of the Turkish architects invited to advise in the restoration of the synagogue: they advocated a different building system and changed the wooden ceiling into a heavy one with the addition of side halls, and gave to the building the mysteriousness characteristic of an Oriental-Byzantine place of worship. It is impossible to accept the opinion that the whole had been one hall, because of the eastern wall's structure. More acceptable is the assumption that the place of the holy ark in an unassuming position next to the entrance opening in the eastern wall was the outcome of the building's earlier function as a place of study. The thickening of the pillars meant that the building no longer appeared as a centralised structure with a main hall circumscribed by pillars and surrounded by a secondary hall (*ambulatorium*). Its interior is quite distorted, as if it were the fruit of an incidental development. Indeed the women's sections in these two synagogues, and in Sephardic synagogues in general, were constructed in the course of time by closing off corners and unimportant spaces that were accidentally created.

The Middle or "Small Congregation" Synagogue

The courtyard of the two above-mentioned synagogues played an important role: as a gathering place for extra worshippers during holy days, a women's section and a meeting-place on the one hand; and, because of the high wall that surrounded it, as an additional room for the synagogue on the other. But because of the growing number of old-age homes in Jerusalem after the Sabbatean movements, the two synagogues were not enough and the courtyard had to be covered by a ceiling and turned into a synagogue. Thus only a small courtyard was left — like a chimney — which served as a means of communication between the synagogues, and as their ventilation, and perhaps also as an eastern entrance to the Elijah synagogue, in accordance with the halakhah. The courtyard of the three synagogues was pushed back north to the place where eventually the Istanbuli synagogue would be built. The ceiling was simple: between the northern wall of the Yochanan ben-Zakkai

synagogue and the courtyard wall boards were spanned and a roof put on. When the four synagogues were restored, a new wall was erected for the Middle synagogue on the southern side, close to the northern wall of the Yochanan ben-Zakkai or in its place, in order to support the stone ceiling of the Middle one. The surrounding high wall which encompassed the whole courtyard disappeared into the wall which borders the Yochanan ben-Zakkai. The Middle synagogue was also renovated with crossing vaults, and here too the ark occupies the whole eastern wall. Even though the planning of the Middle synagogue should be seen as an improvisation, there are clear signs that its plan was influenced by its bigger and older brother, the Yochanan ben-Zakkai synagogue.

The Istanbuli Synagogue

If the Middle synagogue is somewhat of a smaller edition of the Yochanan ben-Zakkai, the Istanbuli is a bigger and better edition of the Elijah synagogue. Its hall is bigger and better lit and it keeps more strictly to the architectural principles on which the Elijah synagogue was based. Also the form of the out-of-centre holy ark was kept, putting it near the entrance which itself is in the east. In this building the *ambulatorium* is kept almost entirely and the passage outside the pillars nearly encircles the centre in ring-fashion.

So, the erstwhile glory has been restored and we can again enjoy the splendour of the four synagogues, even though many details of the history of the buildings have been insufficiently studied before their restoration and still remain hidden from us.

Translated by Chanah Arnon

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