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The end of the Exodus from Egypt

By Amiram Barkat



The Holy Ark in the Maimonides synagogue. The Star of David atop the ark is hanging on by a thread. (Uri Lenz)

CAIRO - Outside it looks like a ruin, but after the guard opens the door to admit visitors, it turns out that there once was a synagogue here. Behind a small courtyard covered with building debris stands a Holy Ark. Its doors are broken, and from its top dangles a Star of David, hanging by a thread. The guard explains that the ceiling of the building collapsed in 1992, and the pile of debris was never cleared away.

It looks like just another Cairo synagogue that has come to a sad end. At least 20 such synagogues have been destroyed since the 1970s, and most of them were larger and more magnificent than the small Maimonides synagogue in Harat al-Yahud, the medieval Jewish quarter of Cairo. But this synagogue is not just any synagogue; it is one of the most important Jewish sites in Egypt and in the entire world.

Last year, special events were held all over the world to mark the 800th anniversary of the death of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, the Rambam (Maimonides). He died in 1204 in Cairo, and according to the accepted tradition, his bones were transferred to Tiberias for burial. But the Jews of Egypt believe his bones never left the country. According to Egyptian tradition, the body of Maimonides was first brought to the small beit midrash (study hall) where he taught, and afterward was buried at an unknown Egyptian location; one of the traditions has it that he is buried today in the small niche in the wall of the ruined synagogue's study hall.

No evidence has been found for any of these traditions, but even historians say that the synagogue and the yeshiva named for Maimonides is one of the oldest synagogues in the

world, almost 800 years old. That is why the Jewish community in Cairo allows only rare visits to the place. After many pleas, they agreed to open its gates to a journalist and a photographer, on the eve of Pesach.

Although not much more remains of the synagogue itself than its four walls, the other parts of the building are still standing. For hundreds of years, the Jews of Egypt used to come on pilgrimages to this place, which is located in the heart of the neighborhood's maze of ancient alleyways. People with incurable diseases believed that they would be cured if they remained to sleep near Maimonides' grave. Today the chances are that not only would they not be cured, they would catch another disease, judging by the stench from the toilets.

Above the entrance to the study hall, in splendid isolation, hangs the portrait of Maimonides, who, according to a popular saying, was the greatest Jew since Moses. In a small hall behind the entrance, benches and other furniture float in what looks like a sewer. The place is flooded with water, almost to the height of the ceiling. One can view the niche of Maimonides' "grave" today only by diving. "What's there, in a word, is a cesspool," says Prof. Michael Lasker of Bar-Ilan University, an expert on Egyptian Jewry. He says that he tried in vain to help the president of the Cairo Jewish community, Carmen Weinstein, find a donor to restore the place. "The large Jewish organizations said it's not in their area of responsibility, and Jews of Egyptian origin have never been very cooperative," he says.

General emptiness

The great synagogue of the Karaites in Cairo, in the Abbassieh neighborhood, also is usually closed to visitors. The guard there agrees to let us in on condition that we don't take pictures. The reason becomes clear immediately: The overall appearance of the synagogue resembles a haunted castle in an (Egyptian) horror film. The building is reminiscent of a huge altar standing entirely deserted, only the sound of the wind banging on the remaining unbroken window panes interrupts the silence. The only visitors are the flock of pigeons that has come to live in the space, so that on the way to the prayer hall, visitors' shoes sink into a thick layer of guano. Two Art Deco chandeliers made of bronze and crystal are the last vestiges of the days of glory. Other chains remain dangling, testimony to additional chandeliers that once hung here.

Up until just a few years ago, this synagogue, named after Moshe Deri, was full of valuable Judaica that was brought to it in part from other Karaite synagogues, before they were destroyed. In his book about Jewish sites in Cairo, written in the mid-1990s, Dr. Yoram Meital of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, an expert on the Middle East, mentions that on the floor of the synagogue were rugs and mats on which the Karaites prayed, that the synagogue building contained about 2,000 books, and that in the Holy Ark there were still valuable Torah scrolls, made of parchment. No trace of any of these exists today. All that remains is one bookcase, a pile of crates sunk in dust and several empty cabinets for Torah scrolls.

Meital believes local Jews were involved in the looting. Already in the early 1990s, when he visited the place to gather material for writing a book, he noticed that around him were “people who were very displeased about the fact that I was documenting the items. At one stage they forbade me to continue.” Yosef Dvir, a spokesman for the Karaites in Israel, says they are well-aware of the fact that “the property in Cairo was not properly maintained,” but they are unable to help. “We barely have enough money to maintain the community in Israel,” he says.

Testimony and stories of Israelis who have visited other sites belonging to the Cairo community paint a similar picture of neglect. In the city’s only Ashkenazi synagogue, in the center of the city, old books and documents are strewn on the floor in a layer of dust and filth. The huge Jewish cemetery in the Bassatine neighborhood serves as an improvised quarry for removing marble, stone and metals from the graves, and hardly a single headstone remains undamaged.

In Alexandria, the situation is better. In the compound of the Jewish community on Nebi Daniel Street stands the Synagogue of Elijah the Prophet, the community office building where the rabbinical court sits, and another building that served as the Jewish school and today is leased to a Muslim educational institution. The beautiful historic buildings are surrounding by manicured gardens and are well maintained.

The synagogue, which is considered the largest in the Middle East, is an impressive building; a broad white marble staircase leads to the entrance, which is surrounded by a decorative stone fence. The huge space inside, which until the mid-20th century held 1,000 worshippers, is illuminated by the light of dozens of seven-branched candelabra, with the addition of sunlight that streams through the stained-glass windows. The stone arches and pinkish Italian Carrara marble columns, with white Greek capitals, lend the place the appearance of a cathedral. The backs of the seats still bear pewter disks with the names of the owners. But the overall feeling is one of emptiness, of a bustling place that has become a museum.

The community building in Alexandria contains a huge archive that preserves the past of the community: birth and death certificates, addresses, and a melange of old books and documents. In one of the locked cupboards are the cups won by the Maccabi Alexandria basketball team, the Egyptian champion in the 1930s. Life is gradually disappearing from here as well. On an abandoned reception desk in the corridor the sign “civilian documents” is still posted in Hebrew and in French, opposite is the deserted hall of the rabbinical court.

”Like lonely shadows, a few short elderly men and women wander in the empty Jewish complex surrounding the synagogue,” wrote Israeli author Haim Be’er 16 years ago, in an article about Alexandria, and nothing seems to have changed except for the number of the elderly, which has decreased. The president of the Alexandria community, dentist Dr. Max Salame, recently celebrated his 90th birthday. Lina Mattatia, the synagogue’s legendary tour guide, is over 80. The head of the community, Victor Balassiano, who claims the title of “the youngest Jew in Egypt,” is 65 years old.

The central synagogue of the Cairo community is Sha'ar Shamayim in the city center, on Adli Street. The magnificent building, which was completed in 1905, is decorated with symbols of the Pharaonic lotus and the palm tree, the symbol of the Jewish community in the city. In the 1980s, the synagogue was renovated with funds provided by millionaire Nissim Gaon, and became revitalized for several years. Dr. Meital still remembers hundreds of Israeli tourists who used to attend the synagogue on festivals. Currently, no regular prayers are held there. The facade of the building that faces the main street is guarded by a unit of Egyptian soldiers, armed with rifles, who stand behind protected shelters. On the other side of the road, permanent signs condemn Israel. For years, Israel has been trying to persuade the Egyptian government to remove the signs. The subject even came up during the most recent talks held by Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom last week in Cairo.

The synagogue itself is dark and deserted, with a depressing atmosphere. In the entrance, next to a large charity box, sits an elderly Jewish woman who has trouble being pleasant to visitors. She doesn't allow visits to the women's section, and she agreed to allow us to photograph the synagogue from inside only after we pleaded with her, "but only one picture."

The second Exodus

A simple memorial plaque attached to one of the columns of the synagogue on Adli Street takes the visitor back 60 years, to the golden age of Egypt's Jewish community. The sign is in memory of Yusuf Aslan Qattawi, a former Egyptian government minister and one of the authors of the 1923 Egyptian constitution, who served as community president from 1924-1942. The Qattawis were members of the Cairo Jewry's moneyed aristocracy. They made their fortune in the sugar industry, and were among the founders of Bank Misr (the Egyptian national bank). The bank's board of directors at the time included other Jewish families such as de Menasce, Rollo, Soares and Cicurel, owners of one of the largest department store chain in the country.

In those years, 40,000 Jews lived in Cairo, with a similar number in Alexandria. Many Jews, from Europe as well as Turkey and the Arab countries, immigrated to Egypt at the end of the 19th century, drawn by the economic prosperity that came with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1896. Only a few thousand had Egyptian citizenship, but they felt welcome in society. The Jews of Alexandria lived in a city where one-third of the population were members of various national minorities, and they felt no special need to learn Arabic.

The situation took a turn for the worse in the late 1930s, as pan-Arab and Islamic sentiments spread through Egyptian society. American scholar Joel Beinin of Stanford University mentions in one of his articles on the subject that not only did the Jews suffer, but so did other minority groups - the Syrian Christians, the Italians, the Greeks and the Armenians - all of which had increasing difficulty maintaining their cosmopolitan-Levantine identity. But the problem that began in 1948 was unique to the Jews.

The establishment of the State of Israel and the War of Independence heralded the beginning of the end of Egyptian Jewry. "The second Exodus" began in 1948, and within two years, one-third of the country's Jews had left. The others, who had hoped that the end of the war would bring them back into favor with the Egyptians, soon discovered their mistake. The Egyptian government, which had outlawed Zionism, had promised protection to the Jews who remained loyal Egyptians, but they didn't always keep their promise. On January 26, 1952, for example, the police refrained from intervening in riots in Cairo, during which dozens of Jews were murdered, and Shepheard's Hotel, the Metro cinema and dozens of other Jewish-owned businesses were burned down.

Two years later, in 1954, Israel provided Egypt with an excellent excuse for continuing with the same policy, with the exposure of a unit of Egyptian Jews who had carried out attacks in Alexandria and Cairo at the instructions of Israeli military intelligence, in what came to be known in Israel as the "stinking affair." Even avowed Egyptian patriots, including the leaders of the Jewish community in Cairo, began to feel unwanted. The Karaites, the "Arab Jews" of Egypt, who for hundreds of years had dressed and spoken like Egyptians, found themselves in the same boat as their Western brothers.

The two final blows to strike the Jews of Egypt - the Sinai Campaign in 1956 and the Six-Day War in 1967 - left only a few hundred Jews in the country; from one-third to one-half of Egypt's Jews immigrated to Israel, and the others went to Western countries - France, Canada, Australia and, of course, the United States. The many businesses were sold to Egyptians or nationalized. The dozens of luxurious villas built by the wealthy Jews along the banks of the Nile and in the center of the city today serve as embassies, upscale residences, museums and libraries.

Torah scrolls at the airport

The communal property of the Egyptian Jews, on the other hand, remained for the most part in Jewish hands. The synagogues, the religious objects, the ancient books and the rare Torah scrolls were a treasure whose value was estimated at tens of millions of dollars. According to Egyptian law, the sale of items that are over 100 years old is forbidden, but the underground clearance sale of the community's assets did not cease, and reached a peak in the 1980s.

Michael Dana, the son of Youssef Dana, who headed the community in those years, told Ronen Bergman in this magazine (January 29, 1996) about Jewish Judaica thieves from the United States who entered the synagogues as tourists, antique dealers who tried to bribe the guards, and many Israelis who turned to his father and offered him a great deal of money for rare items. In some cases, the Egyptian authorities caught the smugglers and confiscated their loot. Several dozen ancient scrolls are still being held in the Cairo airport.

The Israeli ambassador to Egypt at the time, Moshe Sasson, told Bergman that when he arrived in Cairo in 1981, there were 32 synagogues, and when he left, six years later, only

12 remained. Several of the community leaders did not withstand the temptation, and began to sell assets. “They saw that there was no next generation, and that the property would go to Egypt, so they decided to capitalize on it,” says an Israeli Middle Eastern scholar. “They said the money would go to the community, but in effect almost everything went into their own pockets.”

One of the only bodies that acted to rescue the heritage of Egyptian Jews was the Israel Academic Center in Cairo, which belongs to the National Academy of Sciences (under whose sponsorship our visit to Egypt took place). “We discovered huge quantities of books in the synagogues,” says the founder of the center, and its director during those years, Prof. Shimon Shamir. “We discovered that a large percentage of the books came from private collections that Egyptian Jews had thrown out for fear that ‘propaganda material’ in Hebrew would be seized in their homes.”

In the early 1990s, the books, about 15,000 of them, were stored in three libraries belonging to the Jewish community, which are located adjacent to the Sha’ar Hashamayim synagogue on Adli Street, the Ezra synagogue in the Fostat quarter and the Karaite synagogue. Most of the books are from recent centuries, but among them are also three rare religious books from the early 16th century. But the project for collection and preservation was not completed - for budgetary reasons, they say at the center. To date, not all the books have been catalogued, and they are being stored in less than ideal conditions. The present director of the center, Dr. Sarel Shalev, says that he tried to raise about \$5,000 from one of the large Jewish organizations for the purpose of completing the catalogue, but he received no response.

The Ezra synagogue in Fostat, the quarter from which Cairo began to develop in the seventh century CE, is the only synagogue in Cairo that has been fortunate. Originally, the synagogue was a Coptic church, which was sold to the Jews in 882 CE. The synagogue was rebuilt a number of times, the last time in 1890. During that construction work, the Cairo Geniza was discovered in the attic, containing hundreds of thousands of documents written by the Jews of Cairo over a period of almost 1,000 years.

The Ezra synagogue also suffered from neglect for many years, but in 1980, in the wake of the peace agreement, it was chosen as a project that would serve as a symbol of historical coexistence among Jews, Christians and Muslims. The Egyptian foreign minister at the time, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and the president of the World Jewish Congress, Edgar Bronfman, agreed to preserve the synagogue. The preservation work, which was done under the supervision of Bronfman’s sister, Canadian architect Phyllis Lambert, was concluded in the early 1990s, and today the synagogue enjoys a large number of visitors, most of them non-Jewish tourists.

In recent years, the Egyptians have even evacuated the residents from the entire area, in an attempt to turn it into a tourist compound in which the visitors can view the oldest synagogues, churches and mosques in Cairo. Dr. Meital says that with all due respect to the preservation work, he is disturbed by the fact that the place will never again be a synagogue, but will remain as “a kind of interreligious monument.”

The leadership of the Weinstein women

It is hard to know how many Jews are living in Egypt today. Prof. Ada Aharoni of Haifa, a researcher of Egyptian Jewry, who is active in organizations of former Egyptians, estimates their number at 20: eight in Alexandria and 12 in Cairo. However, from a legal point of view at least, the Jewish communities in the two cities are still alive and active, and they administer quite a few assets. The community in Alexandria holds the compound of buildings in Nebi Daniel, the community in Cairo has about 10 synagogues, some of them of great historical value, as we have mentioned, the huge cemetery in Bassatine and an office building and a school in the Abbassieh neighborhood.

The president of the community is Carmen Weinstein, a businesswoman of about 70, who replaced her mother, Esther Weinstein, who died last year at the age of 93. For years, the Jewish women in Cairo were mentioned only if they married famous husbands, like the wives of Chaim Herzog (Aura Ambache), Abba Eban (her sister, Suzy Ambache), Boutros-Ghali (Leah Nadler) and the French prime minister Pierre Mendes-France (Lili Cicurel). The expert on Jewish sites in Cairo, Dr. Meital, still remembers how surprised he was when he read of Esther Weinstein's election to the position. "In a community that since about the year 700 has been dominated by men, that was a genuine feminist revolution. I remember that in Alexandria they didn't know what to make of it."

The bulletin board in the entrance to the synagogue in Adli Street is covered with the pictures of the Weinstein women, mother and daughter, together with Hillary and Chelsea Clinton, who visited the community in 1999. Some former Egyptian Jews accuse Carmen Weinstein of serving the interests of Egypt rather than those of the Jewish community. Her supporters say that she works tirelessly to protect the assets that remain in the community's hands. Prof. Shamir says that Carmen made "supreme efforts" to prevent the destruction of the Jewish cemetery in Bassatine, when the Egyptian authorities wanted to pave an expressway over it. She also built a wall round the cemetery and managed to remove the squatters who had come to live there. (Weinstein refused to meet with us. One of her associates explained that she doesn't meet with Israeli journalists, and doesn't conduct business relations with Israeli groups).

But Weinstein's efforts on the Egyptian front seem to pale when compared to her struggles with her fellow Jews. Her acquaintances say that she is angry at the Israelis living in Cairo, because they stay away from the community's synagogues. In recent years, she has repeatedly turned to wealthy former Egyptians who live in the West, in attempts to raise money to restore the Jewish sites, but without success. "It was quite embarrassing," says Prof. Shamir, who has helped her on a number of occasions. "They said they didn't want to hear about Egypt, that for them it's a closed file. I have no doubt that Egyptian Jewry could do much more to preserve its past."

About 20 organizations of former Egyptian Jews are active today in the world, and many of them have been at odds with one another for years. In recent years, after decades of indifference and neglect, there has been an awakening. Next year, the first World

Congress of Jews from Egypt will be held in Haifa. Prof. Aharoni, one of the initiators of the congress, says that the idea is to “unite forces” in an attempt to preserve the Jewish heritage in Egypt. The initiative that is taking shape, she says, is to transfer the books and the papers of the Jewish communities to a special wing of the new library in Alexandria. “We have received very positive responses to the proposal from the Egyptian authorities,” she says.

However, the idea arouses determined opposition in the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt, a group that was founded in 1996 in the United States. Since its establishment, the organization has been conducting a campaign to remove all the communal property from Egypt, not only sacred books and religious objects, but the community archives in Cairo and Alexandria as well. “For us these aren’t archives, they’re living documents,” explains the organization’s president, Desire Sakkal. “People want their birth certificates, their ketubot [Jewish marriage contracts].”

The heads of the organization have already managed to have articles on the subject appear in the American press, to sign on members of Congress, and to turn to President George W. Bush. In 2001, the State Department announced that a comprehensive study on the subject found no reason to intervene at this stage, since Weinstein, the community president, is opposed to taking the items out of the community’s hands. Sakkal refuses to give up. Recently, he says, he received a letter “from a very high-ranking Israeli official” expressing his willingness to help.

Prof. Shamir is not enthusiastic about Sakkal’s plans. Underlying the demands to take the items out of Egypt, he believes, are often “shady motives.” Prof. Aharoni agrees: “With all due respect to Sakkal’s activity, many former Egyptians throughout the world think that he is too extreme, that this activity is damaging and that it is simply unrealistic.”

Sakkal’s organization has already announced that it will not participate in the upcoming congress, after his demands to take a belligerent line against Egypt were rejected. In an interview with him, Sakal levels sharp criticism at the congress, and calls it “the best attorney that Egypt could have found. If they want to do belly dances with the Egyptians and to eat ful and falafel with them, let them live and be well. We aren’t interested.”
