

Documenting Synagogues in Rosh Ha'ayin: A Scientific and Community Project

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Abstract. Although the majority of the Israeli population is secular Jews, synagogues are scattered all over the country, including non-religious neighborhoods. Rosh HaAyin is ranked as one of the 5 cities with the highest ratio of synagogues (1 synagogue to 300 residents). With a population of 40,000, the city has some 135 synagogues with varying levels of activity. Most of them are community synagogues of the Yemenite Jews founded by private individuals in and near the place of the family's residence. They serve relatives, friends and neighbors, and make a colorful manifestation of old Yemenite Jewish culture. The city municipality had established a volunteer group of interviewers and photographers for the purpose of documenting its synagogues.

A comprehensive questionnaire was developed, covering a range of synagogue aspects: location, founders, the development process, architectural features (interior and exterior), particulars, management and financing, the congregation, activities held at the synagogue on weekdays and holidays, and more. Each synagogue was visually documented by steel photos. Some of the interviews with synagogue representatives were audio-recorded. The volunteers also gathered historical information stored by synagogue boards, such as founding charters, internal rules and regulations, architectural drawings, and so on.

The synagogue plays several manifested and latent roles in the community, such as preserving Jewish and ethnic identity and heritage, supplying community center and commemorating departed worshippers. Since the start of the project in 2009, 76 synagogues have been documented photographically, and 54 of these already have accompanying texts. Each documented synagogue is presented (visually and textually) in *People-Israel* webzine. This popular-scientific site, sponsored by Samuel Neaman Institute for National Policy Research (the Technion, Israel) supply the general public free access to photos and text, and allows the visitors to suggest additional data. This project may serve as model for cultural documentation in other countries.

Keywords: Synagogue, Judaism, Israel, Rosh HaAyin, Jewish-identity, Community-project, Community-center, Documenting, Ethnic-composition, Ethnic-heritage, Cultural-heritage, Webzine, Cultural Data

1. Introduction

In January 2008, the Rosh Ha'ayin municipality embarked on a unique, challenging and fascinating project of documenting the city's history from the time of the British Mandate of Palestine (ended 1948) to the present Israel. This project is being carried out with the help of community volunteers who underwent a four-part training workshop conducted with professionals.

The municipality decided that every year, a number of specific topics would be selected for study and documentation, such as historic buildings, heritage sites, community leader undertakings throughout the years, and the development of the urban landscape. Much material has already been collected in the city's Historical Archive, established in May 2009, where it is processed and stored by various means (including digital) required to preserve it and make it accessible to the public at large.

2. The "Synagogue" as a Jewish Social Institution

The meaning of synagogue in Hebrew is "house of assembly". It is a place in which the community meets, prays and learns together. [1]

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Synagogues have a large hall for prayer (the main sanctuary), and can also have smaller rooms for study and sometimes a social hall and offices. Some have a separate room for Torah study, called the “beit midrash” (“House of Study”). [2]

Communal Jewish worship can be carried out wherever ten Jews (a minyan) assemble. Worship can also be carried out alone or with fewer than ten people assembled together. However there are certain prayers that are communal prayers and therefore can be recited only by a minyan. [3]

Synagogues have been constructed along the Jewish history by ancient kings and wealthy patrons, as well as by the entire community of Jews living in a particular place, or by the followers of a particular rabbi. [4]

Historically, synagogues were built in the prevailing architectural style of their time and place. But naturally there was always the personal and local touch. [5]

3. Synagogues in Israel

Although the majority of the Israeli population is secular Jews, synagogues are scattered all over the country, including non-religious neighborhoods. There are two main reasons for that phenomenon: The social, symbolic and cultural function of the synagogue and the perception of life by the typical Israeli which includes the general belief in God.

All synagogues contain a bimah, a table from which the Torah is read, and a desk for the prayer leader.

The Torah ark is a cabinet in which the Torah scrolls are kept. The ark in a synagogue is positioned in almost always such a way that those who face it, face towards Jerusalem. Thus, sanctuary seating plans in the Western world generally face east, while those in the east of Israel face west.

Other traditional features include a continually lit lamp or lantern, usually electric in contemporary synagogues, called the “ner tamid” (the “Eternal Light”), used as a reminder of the western lamp of the menorah of the Temple in Jerusalem, which remained miraculously lit always.

Orthodox synagogues feature a partition dividing the men's and women's seating areas, or a separate women's section located on a balcony.

Synagogues often take on a broader role in modern Jewish communities and may include additional facilities such as a catering hall, kosher kitchen, religious school, library, day care center and a smaller chapel for daily services. [6]

There is no official number of synagogues in Israel, but it is estimated that there are about 15,000 synagogues all over the country, of which about 1,000 in Bnei Brak (the “capital” of the ultra orthodox sector) and 1500 in Jerusalem. The largest synagogue in the world is probably the Belz Great Synagogue, in Jerusalem (5000 seats).



Fig. 1: Heichal Shila synagogue

Photographed by: Ilan Porat



Fig. 2: Menachem House synagogue

Photographed by: Amir Raveh

4. Documenting Synagogues in Rosh HaAyin

Rosh HaAyin is ranked as one of the 5 cities with the highest ratio of synagogues (1 synagogue to 300 residents). With a population of 40,000, the city has some 135 synagogues with varying levels of activity. Most of them are community synagogues of the Yemenite Jews founded by private individuals in and near the place of family's residence. They serve relatives, friends and neighbors, and make a colorful manifestation old Yemenite Jewish culture. [7]

It is therefore obvious that its synagogues, the majority of which are very small and intimate, may be considered one of the city's most prominent identifying features – so it is only fitting that this aspect of Rosh Ha'ayin be documented and presented to the public.

At the beginning of the process, the city established a volunteer group of interviewers and photographers, and these were handed with a list of synagogues from the city's religious council.

For the purpose of documentation, preference was given to the following:

- Synagogues facing closure or demolition in the older neighborhoods.
- Synagogues possessing unique features, e.g., ancient Torah scrolls or unusual architecture.
- Synagogues located in British Mandate-era buildings.
- Synagogues representing the spectrum of the city's ethnic composition: Yemenite, Indian, Ethiopian, Sephardic and Ashkenazi.
- Synagogues representing each of the city's neighborhoods.

To assist the project, a comprehensive questionnaire was developed, covering a range of synagogue aspects: location, the reason for establishment, the establishment process, architectural features (interior and exterior), contents, management and financing, the congregation, activities held at the synagogue on weekdays and holidays, and more. Each synagogue was visually documented by volunteer photographers. Some of the interviews with synagogue representatives were audio-recorded. The volunteers also gathered historical information stored by synagogue boards, such as founding charters, internal rules and regulations, architectural drawings, and so on.

Since the start of the project in 2009, 76 synagogues have been documented photographically, and 54 of these already have accompanying texts. On average, volunteers spent 15-17 hours at each of the synagogues in order to document them. There are some 3,600 images, including documents, photographs, film clips, etc.

The project was carried out with the scientific supervision of Prof. Oz Almog and Dr. Tamar Almog, the founders and editors of the webzine *People Israel: Your Guide to Israeli Society*.



Fig. 3: Tifereth Natan synagogue

Photographed by: Amir Raveh



Fig. 4: Tifereth Natan synagogue

Photographed by: Amir Raveh

The story of Rosh Ha'ayin's synagogues reveals a rich, multi-faceted and dynamic Jewish world. It is the story of a small, impoverished settlement, established in 1949 by new immigrants from Yemen on the site of

an abandoned British army base, which would one day become a flourishing city whose many different ethnic communities live side by side in harmony. It is the story of the founders who brought their spiritual and cultural world to the newly established State of Israel and resolutely tried to safeguard and maintain it. One of the means to preserve that heritage was by establishing houses of prayer. It is also the story of the next, native Israeli-born generation, which continued to preserve the traditions but also introduced changes and innovations. The ethnically based synagogues also tell the story of immigration to Israel, a young multicultural nation maintaining its ties to the traditions and lifestyles of the population's countries of origin.

5. The Role of the Synagogue in the Community

5.1. Preserving Jewish identity

In the past, when the Jewish people were in exile from their land and living as a minority in the Diaspora, the dangers of assimilation and the erosion of Jewish identity were acute. Gathering daily at the synagogue and maintaining the religious traditions helped Jewish communities around the world to preserve a separate identity. Ideologies, values, customs and texts were created, forming boundaries to protect the Jews' personal and communal identities. Thus, the synagogue has been an expression of one's personal identity and spiritual path, with emphasis on the human, family and community's search for a connection with God. [8]

Gathering for a prayer, sermon, learning, festivities and family celebrations, play a reminder of the historical background and cultural common denominator of the community. It connects people to their childhood and to their extended family.

5.2. Community center

The synagogue is also a kind of an informal community center - especially for senior citizens. The place radiates harmony, graciousness and mutual care among its members. The esteem for the elderly is particularly prominent, as is the care for the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

5.3. "Community cafes"

The role of synagogues is similar to the role of cafes as a neighborhood meeting place (especially for the poor and elderly people).

5.4. Commemorate departed worshippers

People go to synagogues to be alone with themselves and their thoughts and aspirations. The synagogue also serves as a place of commemorating relatives and honors their memory.

5.5. Ethnic heritage center

Synagogues play an important role in the cultural empowerment of both the individual and the community, being an institution voicing in prayer the texts that function as a cultural treasure designed to enrich the worshippers' inner world, and also – through customs, ceremonies and tradition – imparting this culture to the next generation. A father/mother that takes his/her decedents to the synagogue teaches them norms and customs, and bestowing on them their hyphenated-cultural identity. By this they ensure the continued transmission of the ethnic heritage. This is one of the reasons why synagogues can often be used by sociologists as geographical landmarks of local subcultures.

5.6. Public "living room"

Each house of worship has its own beauty. But sometimes the genuine beauty is hidden to the ordinary eye. Often the minor and "marginal parts" are the most intriguing and touching: The tattered chair, the faces of the elders, the pictures on the wall etc. Sometimes the synagogue is the most beautiful place in a poor environment and serves as a sort of residents' "public living room".

5.7. Extension of private property

Sometimes, building a small synagogue as extension of the private apartment, designed to accomplish an economic motivation: evasion from formal permits and tax payment.

5.8. A place to express emotions

The synagogue supplies social platform for meeting people. It is also a niche of emotional expression: hope, depression, happiness, sociability. It's also a very welcoming and pluralistic place.

Unfortunately, sometimes it leads although to internal conflict between the prayers, which results in splitting to two smaller synagogues which serve the two rival groups. This Phenomenon reflects the typical high emotional voltage of the synagogues' culture. One may ask why is it so common in Rosg HaAin? Perhaps this is a remnant of the clan culture in Yemen.

5.9. Stability and self-discipline

Daily prayer supplies a life stability and framework and practice the self-discipline (the duty to pray three times a day on specific hours).

5.10. The digital platform of the presentation

Each documented synagogue is presented (visually and textually) in People-Israel webzine. The internet site supplies the public free access to photos and text, and allows everybody to suggest additional information.

People-Israel is a popular sociological and pedagogical webzine that supplied the platform for publishing the documentation (Oz and Tamar Almog are founders and editors of the website). People-Israel provides comprehensive up-to-date multimedia scientific information on Israel's major social phenomena, subgroups, cultures and lifestyles. [9]

Apart from supplying useful information on the Israeli diverse society, we had two additional goals: (1) To develop a new model for researching, documenting and learning of multicultural societies across the globe. (2) To reduce prejudice and stereotyping in Israeli society, and to promote peace, tolerance and understanding among groups with different cultures and lifestyles.

The in-depth treatment afforded to each "tribe" in the *People-Israel's* database is intended to convey the symbolic message that every culture and lifestyle is of equal social standing and that the country's identity is a social blend.

UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has recognized the *People-Israel* webzine as an innovate development in the research and study of multiculturalism and is helping develop and spread the site as a model for additional countries.

6. Acknowledgements

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