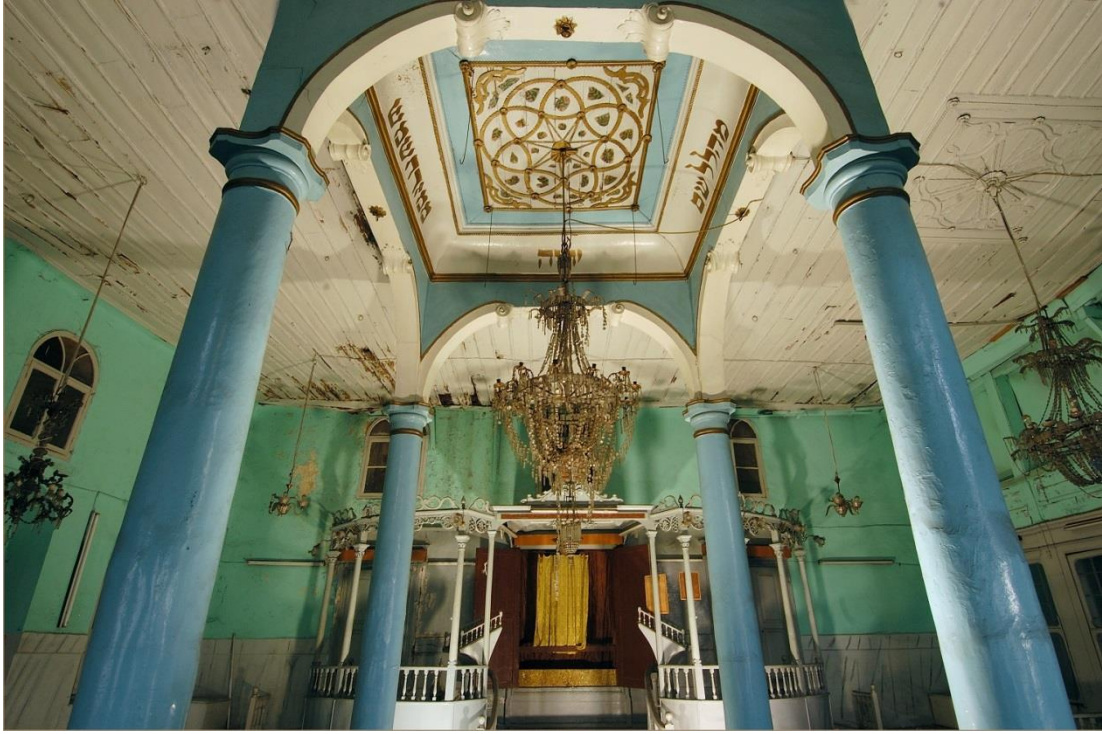


[Saving the Historic Etz Hayim Synagogue of Izmir:](#)

[The Case for Support](#)



[Historical Significance](#)

The name 'Etz Hayim', meaning 'tree of life', was widely used for synagogues in Greek-speaking communities in the Ottoman Empire going back to the period of the Byzantine Empire, centuries before the immigration of Spanish Jews to Izmir. Researchers believe that this synagogue, located in Izmir old city's ancient bazaar, is the oldest among age-old synagogues. According to tradition, Moslems who arrived in Izmir during the Ottoman conquest received permission by the Jewish community to use this synagogue for prayer until the first mosque was built.

[Description](#)

The Etz Hayim is a beautiful and unique synagogue representing a mix of Sephardic and Ottoman styles with ancient murals and wall inscriptions from different periods of its history. The prayer sanctuary is one floor up and the entrance to it is through a hallway, which was used as a small "Beit Midrash" (religious school). The centre of the sanctuary is dominated by four original pillars, which in the past surrounded the pulpit and reached the ceiling in an impressive structure. Various holy verses adorn the ceiling above the pulpit. The Holy Ark is surrounded by a beautiful wooden structure to which two additional "Teivot" (the stages where the Torah is read), one on each side in a typical architectural style of Izmir, were added at a later period.

The Current Situation

Over the years, the synagogue has suffered from natural disasters and has gone through many changes. Today, the synagogue is at risk of collapse as the synagogue's floor has started sinking in a way that endangers the stability of the whole building. Consequently, one of the main exterior walls detached from the sinking floor, and the whole building is in a danger of collapse and requires urgent rescue & preservation measures to save the entire structure.

The Foundation for Jewish Heritage recently conducted a review of all the historic synagogues of Europe and the Etz Hayim in Izmir was recognized as one of the 19 most important synagogue buildings at risk out of the 3,340 historic synagogues documented covering 48 countries.



The Challenge

- The first and most important challenge is to conduct immediate work to stabilize the building in order to stop the floor sinking, the roof from collapsing, and the exterior walls falling apart due to the state of the floor.
- The second challenge is integrating the restored synagogue into the wider Izmir Jewish Museum Project.

The Izmir Project

The Etz Hayim Synagogue is part of a group of remarkable ancient synagogues, all of which were built by descendants of Jews who were deported from Spain and Portugal, and which bear a typical architectural style dating from the 16th century. This complex includes six adjacent synagogues that together constitute an architectural compound which is unique in the world. The aim of the Izmir Project is to turn this cluster of historic synagogues into a Jewish Heritage Museum presenting the history of the Jewish community in Izmir, their Sephardic heritage, and the mutual influence that the Jewish and Muslim cultures had on each other in the ottoman Empire.

Project Partners

- The Jewish community of Izmir
- the Kiriaty Foundation
- the Izmir Municipality
- the Turkish Committee for the Preservation of Historic Buildings
- TARKEM – the company for the development of Izmir old city



The Kiriaty Foundation

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 historical importance of Izmir's remarkable Jewish heritage. As a result, it has become committed to ensuring its future survival and use in a way that celebrates the contribution of Sephardic culture and promotes inter-cultural dialogue.

Progress to Date

- The compound of historic synagogues has been confirmed in the Izmir city master plan as the future 'Jewish Museum of Izmir'.
- The Izmir Municipality and the Turkish Committee for the Preservation of Historic Buildings both issued in 2016 a permit for the restoration and conservation of the Etz Hayim synagogue
- As a result, the initial phase of emergency work on the Etz Hayim was conducted in order to avoid further weakening of the building.
- An architectural survey of the Etz Hayim was conducted in 2016, as was a professional examination of the Synagogue's murals and wall inscriptions.
- an application was successfully made to IZKA - The İzmir Development Agency securing most of the funding for the urgent stabilization works

