

Portugal Synagogue

This Synagogue is a historical site of international significance.

The Portugal Synagogue was the Izmir's most important Synagogue in the 17th and 18th centuries. The synagogue founders and members were Marranos from Portugal who came to the city in the 17th century. They and their descendants were international merchants, brokers, interpreters, and doctors. They were among the city's wealthiest residents and were considered the elite of the Izmir Jewish community and the community's leaders. In the 17th and 18th centuries, this synagogue served as the place of prayer of the Chief Rabbis of Izmir.

Its conservation's value comes primarily from being the location of historical events that had far-reaching impact on Judaism, from events related to the personality and actions of the false messiah, Shabtai Zvi. This Synagogue is known as the place in which dramatic events took place, such as women being called up to read the Torah, and as the center of a power struggle between Izmir's rabbis and Shabtai Zvi.

The leading rabbis of the city worshipped in this Synagogue and taught Torah there.

Today

The Portugal Synagogue stands today as a reminder to passersby that in this very place, in days passed by, Jewish praying voices rose out of this edifice. Voices of men, women and children singing Jewish prayers that still echo in the heart of those who can envision the past glory of this extraordinary community with its fascinating and remarkable history.

The Izmir Project

Given its importance to Izmir Jewish history, the Portugal Synagogue will be part of the exciting Izmir Jewish Museum initiative planned to be constructed within the Synagogue Quarter in Kemeralti as part of the Izmir Project.

The Building

The Portugal Synagogue was founded by Portuguese immigrants in the 1630s. This synagogue is the second synagogue established in Izmir during the Ottoman period. At first, it was built in a garden and, after twenty years, the building was enlarged.

During past centuries, the building was demolished and rebuilt several times as result of earthquakes and fires. The great earthquake that hit Izmir in 1688 also reportedly hit the Portuguese Synagogue. **The Synagogue was completely burned during the Great Izmir Fire in 1772** , and was rebuilt only in 1801, 29 years after the fire . In the early 20th century, it was renovated , with a generous funding from Baron Rothschild.

The building's main structure survived a major fire in 1976, but unfortunately this fire put a stop to regular services in the Synagogue. In the four decades that passed since then, the building was used for various non-religious functions.

Although the Portugal Synagogue was standing for a long time barren and desolate, something of its lost splendor remained in the beautifully designed windows , and most striking of all, the magnificent marble gabled portal, dated to 1899, whose grandeur stands as a reminder to the great history of this building.

The Synagogue's building went through many changes , and the interior of the building did not survive. The general look of the inside indicates that the seating arrangement has been changed with the platform moved to the back side of the building opposite the wall of the Holy Ark, similar to the process that occurred in Shalom Synagogue and others Synagogues in Izmir.

On 2017 the building was again under renovation, this time to serve various cultural purposes and as a living monument to one of the most fascinating communities in Jewish history who once flourished in this building, and as a memorial to the earthshaking historical events that shaped the Jewish people forever.

The Portuguese Community – "Kahal Kadosh Portugal"

Following the expulsion from Spain and Portugal, many Portuguese Jewish immigrants came to settle in Izmir in the early 17th century, when Izmir became the capital of the Aegean Sea as the main port and commercial city. Most of them were conversos Jews ("*Anusey Portugal*") who were allowed by the Ottoman authorities to worship freely their old religion and return to Judaism, unlike in many Catholic countries in Europe.

Portuguese Jews fared better in the Ottoman Empire than their brethren in Europe, soon settling in, and becoming part of their host communities.

Nevertheless, Portuguese conversos in Izmir maintained a degree of autonomy, establishing as early as the 1630's, two communities of their own: "*Kahal Kadosh Neve Shalom*" (Holy Community oasis of peace) and "*Kahal Kadosh Portugal*" (Holy Community of Portugal). The latter was a large and influential community, many of its members prominent merchants with international commercial relationships, including with their brethren who settled in other cities within the Jewish diaspora. This community can be said to be the most influential Jewish community in Izmir.

Already in the 17th century, wealthy and well-established members of the community founded charitable and benevolent institutions to support the poor people of Izmir, which continued to operate also in the 18th century.

The Portuguese Synagogue served the "*Kahal Portugal*", (Portuguese community) in Izmir. In this synagogue, Portuguese Jews preserved their own prayer and liturgical traditions and was reputed to be the largest synagogue in Izmir. **The leading rabbis of the city worshipped in this synagogue and taught Torah there.**

Rabbi Hayim Benveniste, the greatest Sephardic Halachic authority, second only to Rabbi Joseph Karo, author of the "*Shulchan Aruch*" (*The Code of Jewish Law*), worshipped at the Portugal Synagogue and taught Torah there, as did his son Rabbi Israel Benveniste.

The Portugal Synagogue maintained its place as the center of Rabbinical activity of Izmir at the close of the seventeenth century, housing as it did the important homilies of Rabbi Eliyahu Hachohen of Izmir, the greatest preacher of Izmir.

The Portugal Synagogue – Birth and decline of Sabbateanism

Since this Synagogue was the central Synagogue of Izmir and the most important of the city, which served the Chief Rabbis and the leadership of the Jewish community, - Sabbatai Zevi chose it as his base for his ritual activity in order to gain control on the community.

It was at this Synagogue in which Sabbatai Zevi's closest friends and dedicated followers, the hard core of the Sabbateans, congregated and offered worship. One may then regard the Portugal Synagogue of Izmir as the cradle of Sabbatean Messianic movement in the 17th century.

Moreover, it was in this Synagogue that Sabbatai Zevi was proclaimed, in a special rite, the Messiah of the Jews, and he went on to gather followers from the entire Jewish world. This Synagogue has therefore the utmost significance for the history of messianic ideas in Judaism: in this holy place, the Sabbatean movement made its very first steps.

Later on, events that left their mark on the history of the entire Jewish people in Europe, and left alone the Izmir Jewish community, took place in the Portugal Synagogue. Fierce confrontations between Sabbatai Zevi's supporters and his detractors took place in this synagogue. **These culminated with the most prominent Rabbis of Izmir, Rabbi Joseph Escapa (Sabbatai Zevi mentor), and Rabbi Aharon Lapapa, excommunicating Sabbatai Zevi, and expelling him from Izmir.**

Moreover, it was at the Portugal Synagogue that, for the first time ever in Jewish history, Sabbatai Zevi invited women to read from the Torah scroll, motivated by his messianic ideology that saw men and women as equal. In the whole history of the Jewish people, the Portugal Synagogue is the very first in which women were invited to read from the Torah, hence its immense significance on the history of Synagogues

Aftermath and Aftershock of Sabbateanism

In time, "*Kahal Kadosh Portugal*" recovered from the bitter conflicts and ultimate, Rabbis' disillusionment that afflicted the Jewish world in the aftermath of Sabbatai Zevi's dramatic conversion to Islam. Rabbi Hayim Benveniste and his son & successor Rabbi Israel Benveniste were the Synagogue's Rabbis and Izmir's chief Rabbis, and also the famous kabbalist and religious judge Rabbi Eliyahu Hacoen continued to, operated and teach Torah within its walls, as did many other prominent rabbis.