

Roots and Branches

Those unique synagogues in Israel can provide a link to the past, family history

By Miriam Weiner

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In synagogues worldwide, Jews gathered to welcome the New Year, as their ancestors had done for generations. The synagogue represents the home of our spiritual roots and a link which bonds Jews throughout the Diaspora.

During a recent visit to Israel, the synagogue and its relationship to family history became a vocal point of my trip.

My first Shabbat in Jerusalem began at the Great Synagogue, directly across the street from the Sheraton Plaza Hotel. I was overwhelmed with the beauty of the architecture and the feeling of spiritual closeness which I had experienced once previously in Madrid.

For family historians, Beth Hatefutsoth, The Museum of the Diaspora located on the campus of Tel Aviv University, represents a unique opportunity to explore their roots on many levels through the exhibits, films of community life, photo collections, computer data bases, and archival material.

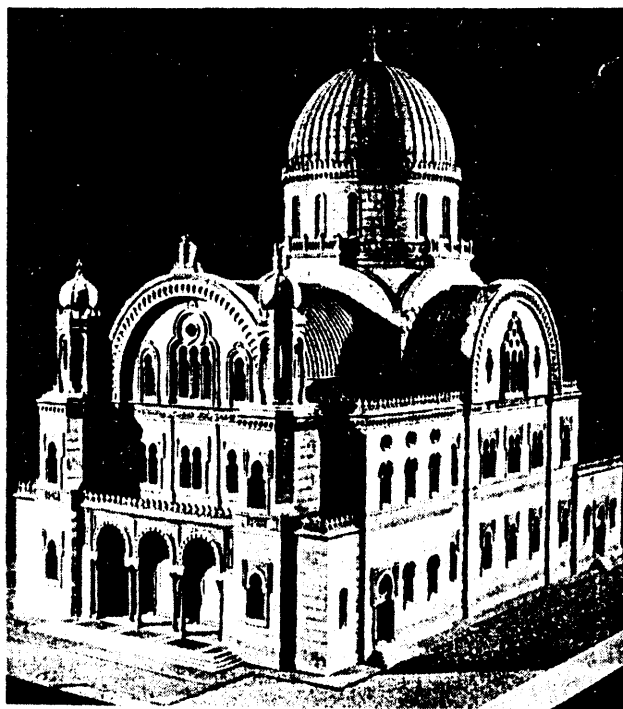
I was particularly interested and moved by the "Gates of Faith," which contains exquisitely crafted scale models of the exteriors and interiors of famous synagogues from the Second Century synagogue of Sardis in Turkey to the ultra-modern Beth Shalom Synagogue in Elkins Park, Pa., designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

Other models represented the synagogue in Chodrow, USSR (formerly Poland); the "Altneuschul" in Prague, Czechoslovakia; the Tempio Israelitico in Florence, Italy; the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island; the synagogue of Aleppo, Rashi's study room in Worms, the Great Synagogue of Amsterdam with 613 lamps. The song, *Adon Olam*, is heard in the background in 12 different Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Oriental versions which accompany the visitor during the exhibit tour in the museum.

In the gift shop at Beth Hatefutsoth, you can purchase postcard replicas of the model synagogues. Also available is "The Synagogue" by Geoffrey Wigoder (1986), and a beautifully illustrated 1988 publication, "Beth Hatefutsoth: The First Ten Years," which includes several photos of the synagogue models.

My tour guide, Gil Peretz, who undoubtedly was "the best in all of Israel," took me to the Old City with our first stop in the Jewish Quarter at the Sephardi synagogues known as the R.Y.B.Z. Center, reconstructed and rebuilt on a national level following the Six-Day War in 1967. Today, the synagogues provide religious services on weekdays, Shabbat, and festivals and are maintained by the Jerusalem Sephardi Council. The four synagogues are the result of the genius of the late Philadelphia architect Louis Kahn.

This historic center, together with the nearby Sephardi Educational Center, is destined to be a vast project for the preservation of Sephardi Jewish heritage and culture. The



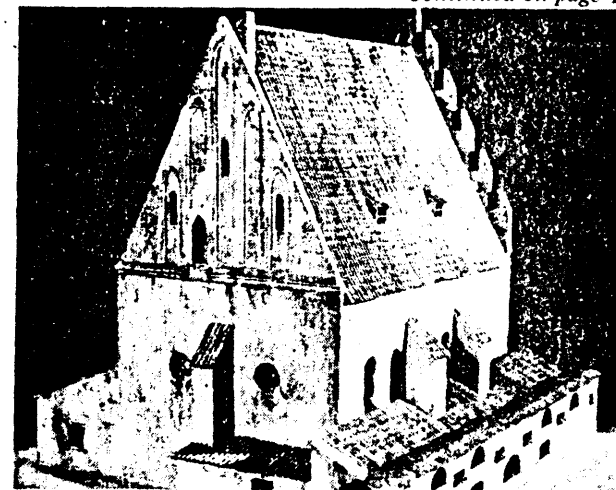
In the Beth Hatefutsoth in Tel Aviv is the model of the Tempio Israelitico Synagogue in Florence, Italy, completed in 1882 and restored after World War II.



The "Shulhof" (The Synagogue Square) was part of the great community center in Vilna, Lithuania, destroyed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. This model also can be found at the Beth Hatefutsoth on the campus of Tel Aviv University.

R.Y.B.Z. is composed of the Great Synagogue of Jerusalem, the Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue, the Istambouli Synagogue, and the Ha'emtzai Synagogue. The extensive on-site indoctrination and history was provided by Aryeh Grayevsky, who is well versed with the history of the Jewish Quarter and the four synagogues in particular. As he mesmerized me with his stories and knowledge, I felt torn between continuing the scheduled tour or remaining at the synagogues.

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The Museum of the Diaspora (Beth Hatefutsoth) in Tel Aviv also features a model of the "Altneuschul" in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The oldest synagogue in Europe still used for worship, it was built in the 13th-14th centuries. This model displays the "faith" section of the synagogue.



This model of the "faith" section of the Rema Synagogue in Krakow, Poland, built in 1553 in the Renaissance style. It is one of the few synagogues in Poland that survived destruction by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Synagogues in Israel

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Family histories can be found in many synagogues, such as the Italian Synagogue at 27 Hillel St. in Jerusalem, which has several genealogies in its Nahon Collection.

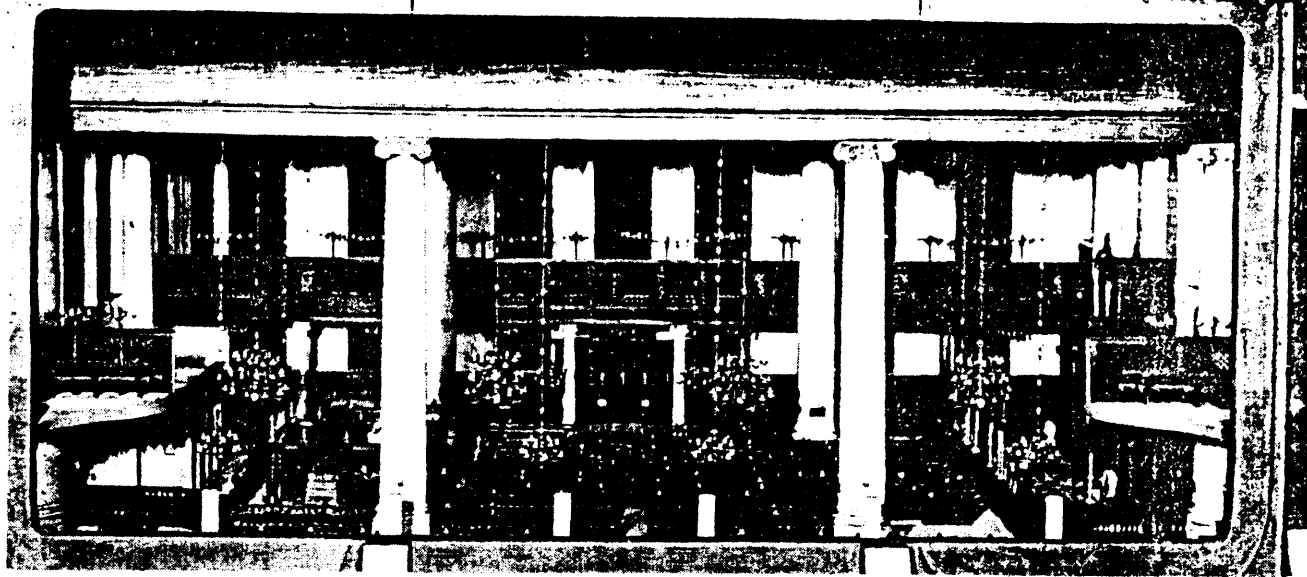
As a family historian, I spend a considerable amount of time in bookstores, particularly those with enticing copies of out-of-print books. Some special "finds" were because of the determined efforts of Mrs. Slutzky at Bet Hillel Books, 4 Hill St. in Jerusalem.

One morning while waiting for my guide, I walked out of the Sheraton Plaza just to get a head start on a beautiful September day in Jerusalem. Right across the street was a small used bookstore. I went in to check its stock of *Yizkor* (memorial) books. There were several, but the one which particularly interested me was "Sefer Kielce" because I have a close friend with roots there who would be so excited to receive a book about her ancestral town in Eastern Europe.

A visit to J. Robinson & Co. Bookseller, 31 Nachlat Benyamin St. in Tel Aviv, was a "must" as Mr. Robinson is well-known as a source for out-of-print Judaica and particularly difficult to locate *Yizkor* books. On the shelves are thousands of books. When I requested books about synagogues, he selected "Synagogues in Poland and Their Destruction" by David Dawidowicz (Mosad Harav Kook/Yad Vashem, Jerusalem,

1960); "The Synagogues of Italy" (1954); and "The Synagogues of North Africa" (1974), both by Jacob Pinkerfeld (Bialik Institute, Jerusalem).

Even though my new books were getting heavy, I headed off for some more shopping and ended the day in a restaurant on Jaffa Rd. near the corner of King George Ave. When I entered Feferberg's Restaurant, I was greeted by Shalom "Charly" Bar, who began a conversation shortly after seating me. When he said his family came from Morocco, I brought out my new book and while I ate dinner, Charly spent about 20 minutes looking at "The Synagogues of North Africa." He interrupted my meal briefly to point out one photo of a cemetery, recalling how he used to walk right past that cemetery on his way to school. He surrendered the book somewhat reluctantly.



A model of the Great Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, Holland, dedicated in 1675, which still stands as originally built. This magnificent synagogue has now been closed as the small Jewish community cannot afford

the measures necessary to defend it from terrorist attacks. This model in the Beth Hatefutsoth is a reminder of its past glory.

The number of the new books acquired during the trip represented an extra suitcase which increased my luggage weight precariously. However, all arrived safely with me on the Tower Air flight back to JFK Airport.

There are many other good references for synagogues and their history, including "Synagogues of Europe" by Carol Krinsky; "The Old Synagogues of Turkey" by Don A. Halperin; "The Architecture of the European Synagogue" by Rachel Wischnitzer; "Wooden Synagogues" by Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka; "The Synagogue" edited by Uri Kaploun; and "The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side" by Gerard R. Wolfe and Jo Renee Fine.

The wealth of Jewish history represented in old synagogues is one more link to your unique family history to be discovered and savored.

Miriam Weiner, a certified genealogist, author and lecturer, has prepared a 55-page beginner's guide on how to research family history that includes charts, list of archives/libraries, bibliography, maps, family group sheets and more. It can be ordered for \$12.50 by writing to her at 136 Sandpiper Key, Secaucus, N.J. 07094.