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Ben Ezra Synagogue: A Different Side of Old Cairo



How did a community of over 75,000 Jews vanish from Egypt? After the founding of Israel in 1948 the situation for Jews in the region became impossible and Jews in Egypt were to be forever declared Zionists and enemies of the state as a result of the Suez crisis in 1956. The Jews' assets were confiscated and they were expelled, while it is believed that around 25,000 left voluntarily. Others were held in prisons such as Abu Zaabal and Tora for a period of up to three years on account of the 1967 war. All of these events led to the eventual and absolute disappearance of a community rich in culture and heritage.

Ben Ezra is quite easily accessible from anywhere in Cairo, with the Metro being the most convenient. From the Marc Girgis station, take a left and you'll find an underground tunnel that leads to a number of heritage sites including Ben Ezra. The synagogue may appear to be quite ordinary but the history behind it is on the contrary, quite extraordinary.

Ben Ezra is often referred to as the El-Geniza Synagogue; Geniza being Hebrew for 'storage room' and in the 19th century, sacred Hebrew manuscripts were found stored there. The collection, widely known as the 'Cairo Geniza', gave significant insight into how the Jewish community dealt with past Islamic

leaders, as well as several interpretations of the Torah. The manuscripts were eventually shipped to Cambridge, England where scholars from around the world seek them.

Located

directly behind the hanging church, Ben Ezra Synagogue was originally a church built in the 8th century, named El Shamieen Church. Local legend says that the shores delivered Moses to the exact place where the Ben Ezra Synagogue stands today. Adding to the historical significance of the sight, legend also has it that a copy of the Old Testament written by Ezra the Prophet (Al Azir) himself is located inside this mystical place.

In order to pay

annual taxes to the Muslim rulers of Egypt in 882 AD, the Copts were forced to sell the church to the Jews. Abraham Ben Ezra paid 20,000 dinars for the structure during the reign of Ahmed Ibn Tulun. The synagogue has been through much renovation and restoration over the years; the current building dates back to 1892 and is a faithful reconstruction of the building that had previously collapsed. It was during this most recent reconstruction the famous 'Cairo Geniza' manuscripts were discovered.

A Basilica

design, the building has a distinct rectangular shape and is made up of two floors: the first is designated to men while the second to women. The first floor is divided into three main parts, most important of which is an octagonal centre with the Bima – a stage for Torah recitation.

The detailing

of star, octagon and rectangular shapes around the synagogue gives off a sense of the Ottoman period and the synagogue's design is similar to architecture of that time. Geometric shapes and patterns define the aesthetics.

Serenity and

beauty can be felt and viewed all around the interior of this one-of-a-kind architectural wonder. You can picture all the families who once came here to worship as they sat on the wooden benches, placed on either side of the synagogue. The benches seem to be extremely fragile though, so be very cautious while sitting on them.

Adding to the

legendary setting is a seemingly bottomless well, situated behind the synagogue; many believe this is the site where the basket that the Prophet Moses was placed in by his mother was allegedly found. Although the area is fenced, you can get a glimpse of this well through the iron railings. Unfortunately, there is no proper sign explaining its significance.

There is so

much more that could be done with this site. As a historical site, the Ben Ezra Synagogue has as much history and culture engrained into it as any other tourist attraction in Egypt. Unfortunately, though, it's poorly managed, neglected, and will probably forever live in the shadow of Egypt's Pharaonic and Islamic history.

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