

# Video Clip: Ben Ezra Synagogue

## *Egypt*

The Ben Ezra Synagogue served as a communal center for the Jews of Fustat, Old Cairo in Egypt. It dates back to over a millennium but the traditions surrounding the location of the synagogue go back further. The Ben Ezra Synagogue, once a pilgrimage site, is as rich in tradition as it is architecturally rich in design and meaning.

### **Suggested Implementations:**

#### Tanach

1. Story of Baby Moses
2. Book of Jeremiah
3. Book of Ezra

#### Jewish History:

1. Maimonides
2. First Temple destruction – Babylonian appointment of Gedaliah

### **Background**

The Jewish community of Egypt dates back to the sixth century BCE after the First Temple was destroyed. The Book of Jeremiah mentions a wave of Israelites leaving for Egypt after the Babylonian appointed Jewish leader Gedaliah was assassinated. But today's Egyptian capital, Cairo, became the center of Jewish life in Egypt following the Crusades of 1168. Cairo's Jewish community lived primarily in the new city, in the Ḥārat al-Yahūd (Jewish quarter). Throughout the medieval period, Jews maintained their cultural traditions and relative political autonomy, and ultimately advanced economically into positions as craftsmen, traders, moneychangers, and physicians.

However, the Mamaluk era (1250-1517) through the Ottoman era and into the late eighteenth century, life in the Jewish community becoming increasingly regulated. In the nineteenth century, the Jewish community felt safer under the rule of Muḥammad 'Alī than during other periods of history. Additionally, Cairo's Jewish population began to boom from about 3,000 in the early 1800s to over 29,000 in 1917. Following Egypt's independence from Britain in 1922, the Jewish population in Cairo continued to boom, reaching 41,860 in 1947. However, as Nazi propaganda spread, Islamist movements rose, and the newly established State of Israel defeated the Egyptian army, antisemitism was on the rise. The next decades were difficult, leading up to the 1967 war, at which point the majority of Cairo's remaining Jewish community had fled the country, often for Israel, France, or Italy. Today, only a few dozen, primarily elderly, Jews remain in Cairo.

Still some significant sites remain that attest to Egypt's once rich Jewish community. For well over a millennium, the Ben Ezra Synagogue served as the central synagogue of Fustat, Old Cairo and pilgrimage site for the Jewish community. There are many theories as to when the physical structure was built with one theory even dating back to 25 CE. The variety of names by which this synagogue is known (Ezra Synagogue, Geniza Synagogue, Knesset Eliyahu, Kanisat al-Shamiyin) will attest to traditions associated with this location dating back even further.

Moses is the most ancient figure associated with this location. A local tradition holds that adjacent to the synagogue there was once a canal flowing with water from the Nile, where Moses was found by Pharaoh's daughter. Another tradition is even engraved in golden letters on marble tablets inside the synagogue and tells of Moses praying before God in this very location. The tablets read:

"A legend held by the residents of the city tells that in this place prayed Moses the Prophet, and about this place it is written in the Torah 'Then Moses went out of the city and spread out his hands towards the Lord.' And it's accepted by them (the residents) that this was the place where his prayer was."

“אגדה בפי תושבי העיר תספר כי במקום הזה התפלל משה רבינו עליו השלום ועל מקום זה כתוב בתורה "ויצא משה את העיר ויפרוש כפיו אל ה'". וקבלה בידם כי במקום הזה היתה תפילתו.”

It is also said Jeremiah the Prophet built on this site an altar in the seventh century BCE.

Ezra the Scribe, a prominent Biblical figure from the fifth century BCE, is said to have written a Torah manuscript that he gave to the local Egyptian community and kept in a special cupboard beside the ark. The synagogue was originally called the Ezra Synagogue based on this tradition until somewhere over the centuries it turned into “Ben Ezra.”

The name isn't the only thing that changed over the centuries. Due to natural causes and human intervention, the synagogue underwent a rebuilding in 1889-1892 and another extensive restoration in 1989-1991. Even so it has kept to the same basic basilica structure. The space is long and narrow with a men's section on the ground floor and women's section on the second floor. The synagogue's furniture and the ark is made of wood with shell inlays in the Muslim style. And probably in a nod to the ancient Egyptian culture, the columns contain lotus flower capitals.

On the ground floor stands the white marble *bimah*, an elevated platform from which the cantor leads the prayer service and the Torah is recited. There's another marble-clad platform, the *mastaba*, a feature unique to this synagogue. It is carved with gilded writings, including the tradition linking the site of Moses' prayers to this very location.

The synagogue complex contains a courtyard with adjacent rooms for the gabbai and shamash. In the courtyard, they would celebrate Bar Mitzvahs, weddings, and secular ceremonies. Within the complex there was also a mikveh, with both a large and small dipping pool, the sole remainder of the pre-1889 building together with the complex's outer wall. As the Jewish religious center of Fustat, the complex also housed the Beit Din, or Jewish council.

Probably its most famous feature is the Geniza, a storage of worn out books and papers, mainly written in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic. Known as the “Cairo Geniza,” the chamber is located in the synagogue's attic, reachable on the left side of the women's gallery. The items were placed in it through a small hatch that still can be seen today. The books and papers found there contained canonical texts written by Maimonides and Saadya Gaon, liturgical poetry, and fragments of Torah scrolls alongside secular legal documents, personal correspondences and even some shopping lists. This Geniza housed the largest collection of medieval manuscripts, spanning 1000 years of documentation. The Geniza's treasure of documents provides us with insights into not just the community's religious happenings, but also their day-to-day lives.