

Building Aleppo in Jerusalem

A tiny architectural jewel nestled within the picturesque jumble of Jerusalem's Nahlaot neighborhood, the Ades Synagogue preserves the traditional craftsmanship and liturgy of Jewish Aleppo

Where To?

Ades Synagogue
Jewish Aleppo's historic
synagogue in Jerusalem

1 Beersheba Street



Fortuitously situated by the Mahane Yehuda open-air market, Jerusalem's trendy Nahlaot district is a picturesque maze of alleyways. The odor of fresh fish rising from the stalls mingles with the comforting aromas of hummus and bourekas, attracting more Israelis than tourists, who can't see how this corner of the Mediterranean offers anything more than Naples, for example. Which is why, if summertime tour guides do end up with their sweaty flock in Nahlaot, they head straight for its most unique – and air-conditioned – landmark: the Ades Synagogue.

Funded by the Ades family of Aleppo, Syria, the synagogue is an architectural gem built in

1901 as part of the Nahalat Zion section of the area. (Practically every block in Nahlaot was built separately and named for someone else. There are thirty-two such "neighborhoods," eighteen of which went up between 1875 and 1900.)

The boxlike Jerusalem-stone exterior is misleading, especially in view of the grandiose sign on the building: "The Great Ades Synagogue of the Aleppo Community, from the City That Was the Crowning Glory of All Syrian Jewry. Founded 5661." (See "By the By," p. 68.) Experienced guides lead groups straight through the modest iron gate, past the myriad marble memorial plaques, and then savor the oohing and aahing over



the magnificent ornamentation gracing the synagogue interior.

Wandering Ark

The Ades Synagogue is Syrian Jewry's main center in Nahlaot, although the community maintains a smaller branch nearby, in the Beit Midrash of Aaron Silvera, right next to the market. Both proudly preserve Syrian and specifically Aleppo Jewry's rich aesthetic and liturgical legacy in Jerusalem.

Albert-Abraham Antébi lived in the city circa 1900. Born in Damascus but with deep family roots in Aleppo, he was fortunate enough to be both director of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and representative of Baron Hirsch's new Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) in Jerusalem. Unfazed by conflict of interest, Antébi conveniently orchestrated the Alliance's 1891 sale of land for another JCA mini-neighborhood in Nahlaot. He then offered

attractive mortgages for all the plots in what was to become Nahalat Zion, enabling poorer members of his community to own their own one-and-a-half-room home complete with kitchen and bathroom. No wonder Nahalat Zion was soon nicknamed "Little Aleppo."

Yosef and Ovadiah Ades were among Nahalat Zion's better-off residents. Having made a small fortune in Egypt, they spent it building a small but exquisite spiritual palace for their Jerusalem congregation. The original inscription from 1901 still proudly announces that the synagogue was erected "with the generous donation of its honorable officers, both valued above the purest gold," in memory of their grandparents and in honor of "the Aleppo congregation, may it be established in righteousness in the Nahalat Zion neighborhood, in the Holy City of Jerusalem."

The magnificent ark spans the entire eastern wall. Ades Synagogue, Nahalat Zion, Jerusalem

Photo: Tamar Hayardeni

Representing both the JCA and the Alliance, Antébi brokered an incestuous land deal so that one could build on the other's property



The synagogue's jaw-droppingly beautiful eastern wall is almost completely taken up by a stunning ark, carved from dark walnut inlaid with mother-of-pearl, bronze, and ivory. It's decorated with geometric patterns and arabesques, peaking at the center with the Ten Commandments. The beadles recollect how the Ades clan paid thousands of lire for this work of art in Damascus, then had it dismantled, loaded onto camels, and transported to its destination by the same caravan that brought the family from Aleppo to Jerusalem. Apart from totally overlooking the Ades brothers' long sojourn in Egypt, this tall tale contradicts claims that the ark was made in the land of Israel by artisans originally from Damascus, with no Bactrian involvement whatsoever.

From Wood to Stone

In the Ades Synagogue, as in most Oriental synagogues, the reader's platform and lectern stand in the center, surrounded by padded wooden benches. The original (another Damascene import courtesy of the Ades brothers) was a masterpiece of walnut marquetry to match the ark – until some Judaica-loving burglar made off with it one night. Its replacement, a stone mosaic dais, was definitely something of a comedown.



The stone platform was donated in the 1960s by Meir Levy, a building contractor of Turkish extraction who prayed with the Aleppans and decided to make a contribution to their synagogue in memory of his parents. The supposedly marble structure was actually common Hebron limestone, cut and polished – evidently the height of design chic at the time.

As the synagogue's centennial approached in 2001, it was definitely time for an upgrade. Local artist

The doors of the Ades Synagogue honor its generous patrons, Yosef and Ovadiah Ades of Aleppo

Photo: Yehonatan Tsahor, Israel Antiquities Authority

Yaakov Stark, who painted the synagogue friezes, left his own commemorative plaque: "From Yaakov Stark, [...] the Holy City his inheritance"

Photo: Ze'ev Radovan, Widener Library



Tour Highlights

→ Making its mark: Jerusalem suffered shelling in World War I, and one projectile fell in the alleyway right opposite the Ades Synagogue. Shrapnel scars still pit the iron gate at the entrance, lest we forget this assault on the Holy City.

→ Spot the mistake: One of the verses from Isaiah painted on the walls contains an error. The text should read, "I shall bring them to My holy mountain and make them rejoice in My house of worship" (56:7). So where's the mistake? You'll have to visit to find out.

→ Why ostrich eggs? The reader's platform is adorned with banded ostrich eggs mounted on lampstands. Similar eggs once hung from ceilings or chandeliers in most Ottoman synagogues. See "By the By," p. 68.

→ Return of the snake: Among the tribal emblems originally adorning the synagogue walls was a snake, as in "Dan shall be a serpent by the way, a horned viper on the path [...]" (Genesis 49:17). Unfortunately, however, the painting was so frighteningly lifelike that a young woman once miscarried at the sight of it. So the reptile was removed, leaving the round medallion of Dan empty. After many years, the snake was recently reinstated.



Yigal Tamir fashioned a stunning new platform out of European walnut inlaid with mother-of-pearl from the Red Sea, more stylistically similar to the original. Both Israel's president and prime minister even turned up for the dedication ceremony.

The synagogue walls are another conversation piece, their green ornamentation interspersed with menorahs, stars of David, and abstract arabesques. Scriptural

verses, symbols of the twelve tribes, Zodiac signs, and classical pillars abound, all painted by a Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts graduate commissioned to spruce up the place in 1912. (The school is still around the corner on Bezalel Street.) His "signature" remains on the two corners of the wall above the ark:

The decorations are donated to the synagogue by artist Yaakov

The synagogue reopened after preservation work in 2015, with the long-absent snake image back on the wall. The tribe of Dan's pre-restoration medallion, without the bad-luck serpent

Photo: Tamar Hayardeni

The Ades family paid thousands for the ark, which was dismantled, then transported by camel from Damascus



By the By

→ Jews began leaving Aleppo after the Suez Canal opened in 1869, disrupting local trade routes. Many ex-Aleppans relocated to Jerusalem, and this new congregation replaced Aleppo as the spiritual center of Syrian Jewry. The word *keter* (crown) is proudly displayed on the Ades Synagogue wall to remind all and sundry that its community watched over the Aleppo Codex (see "Crown of the Torah," p. 36) for generations, until it disappeared during the Syrian riots in 1947. The synagogue has its own facsimile of this famous work.

→ Glazed or painted ostrich eggshells served as containers in antiquity and often feature in mosques and churches as well as Oriental synagogues. Possibly doubling as insect repellents, these items also came to symbolize concentration during prayer, for the dubious reason that female ostriches are said to guard their eggs twenty-four hours a day, never looking away. This very gaze supposedly warms the mother's unborn offspring, freeing her to sit elsewhere. The truth is that ostriches do roost on their eggs, but let's not let zoology get in the way of an Aleppo custom. As Rabbi Eliyahu Hakohen observed in 17th-century Smyrna, Turkey:

The reason for hanging ostrich eggs [from the ceiling] in the synagogue is that it's a miniature Temple, and when one sees these eggs he remembers that the eyes of the Holy One Blessed Be He are always on the land of Israel, the site of our Temple, and thus one comes to pray for [the end of] the exile and destruction. From here we learn not to mock any custom of Israel, for all [such practices] have some source on which they're based. (Eliyahu Hakohen, *Midrash Talpilot*, Warsaw edition, p. 78a)

→ In 2009, controversy rocked the Ades Synagogue when veteran members tried retouching the wall decorations. The group brought in an alleged restoration expert from France, but his "preservation" soon caused irreparable damage. Shocked municipal preservation officials sent him packing, and after two years of passionate debate, the Heritage Ministry agreed to fund the necessary work. The Israel Antiquities Authority undertook the job, with Jerusalem's Ben-Zvi Institute providing academic supervision. The result is a sight for sore eyes.

Stark of Bezalel, in the Holy City of Jerusalem, may it be rebuilt and established.

Stark, who taught in Bezalel until his untimely death of pneumonia at age thirty-four,

The Ades Synagogue has preserved Aleppo's Jewish cantorial heritage. View of the synagogue from the corner of Beersheba and Shiloh Streets

Photo: Sissigel

A young woman miscarried at the sight of the lifelike snake painted on the synagogue wall



refused all payment for his work, aside from expenses and perhaps the odd refreshments.

The Holy Derby

Ever since the Ades Synagogue was founded, only the bravest cantors have dared to lead its prayers, facing down worshippers ready to do battle at the slightest mispronunciation or variation in emphasis. The congregation's pride and joy is therefore its outstanding league of cantorial veterans, each intimately familiar with every quarter-tone interval on the Sephardic liturgical scale, or *makam*.

Today their virtuosity is more or less limited to two seasons of the year. The first is that of Selihot, the pre-dawn penitential prayers

recited throughout the Hebrew month of Elul, complete with shofar blasts loud enough to wake the dead and black coffee strong enough to keep them with us. The second – and the more significant, surprisingly – is that of the *bakashot*.

Chanting the *bakashot* (requests), another nighttime custom, dates back to 16th-century Oriental communities. Devotees gather to sing liturgical poems in the wee hours of winter Sabbaths, until it's time for morning prayers.

A competition affectionately known even in Hebrew as the “Holy Derby” is held twice yearly in Jerusalem, pitting the cantors of Ades against those of the Bukharan Quarter's central synagogue. Alternating between these two venues, the contest usually takes place on the Sabbath of Hanukka and roughly six weeks later, when the Song of the Sea is read as part of the weekly Torah reading.

Seated opposite one another, the two teams attempt to outdo each other's spiraling *makam* scale as they progress from one liturgical poem to the next, with the audience cheering them on. If you enjoy Sephardic warbling in the dead of night, make your way to Ades on a winter Sabbath. You won't be disappointed. □



Aleppo vs. Bukharan. Poster advertising the Holy Derby

Photo: Tamar Hayardeni

Handy Info

Don't Miss

Knesset Museum

24 King George Street
Token entry fee, by appointment only
074-789-1711

Hebrew Music Museum

10 Yoel Moshe Salomon Street
Entry fee
(02) 540-6505

Jerusalem Artists' House

12 Shmuel Ha-naggid Street
Entry free
(02) 625-3653



Tamar Hayardeni Doctoral student in Bar-Ilan University's Land of Israel and Archaeology Department. Author and tour guide

