In Izmir tradition, this is the house where Shabbtai Zvi was born in 1626. Would we find his secret followers?

Dwindling Generations

Searching for *Shibuta* and Shabbeteans between the Tigris and Euphrates

MESORAH Quest with ARI & ARI

Turkey, the modern incarnation of the Fertile Crescent, has shadowed Jewish life since Avraham Avinu traveled from Ur Kasdim and Rivkah watered Eliezer's camels. We wanted to see how the Jews in outlying cities were faring today, in the towns that once burst with Jewish vibrancy. We wanted to find the Donmeh, the secret sect of believers in Shabbtai Tzvi who never admit to their affiliation. We wanted to discover the ancient fish of the Euphrates praised in the Talmud. What would our quest reveal?

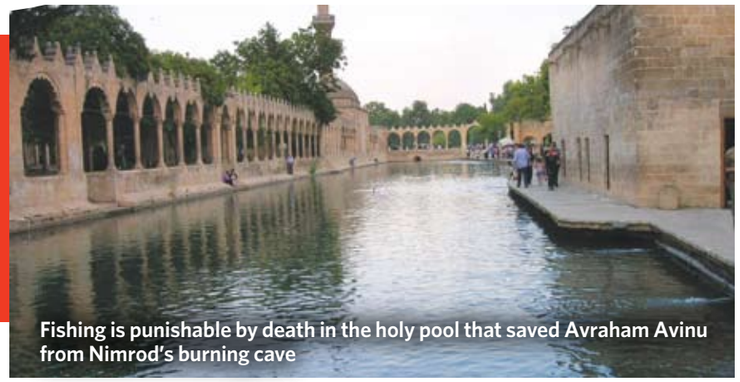
BY ***Ari Greenspan and Ari Z. Zivotofsky***

Does this dentist really possess a piece of Shabbtai Zvi's cape?

The original stone from Chizkiyahu's tunnel, stored for safekeeping in Istanbul

The "holy fish" rise to the surface when fed

Ari Z. (L) and Ari G. (2nd from R) enjoy a state dinner of tin-foil-wrapped shibuta fresh from the Euphrates, with the Urfa local governor and friends


Fishing is punishable by death in the holy pool that saved Avraham Avinu from Nimrod's burning cave

Although the center stage of Jewish past, present, and future is Eretz Yisrael, its neighbor to the north has always played a supporting — if not always supportive — role. We've traveled to Turkey several times to gain a greater appreciation of what it must have been like for our forefathers who lived in that part of the world, traversing Jewish history from Avraham Avinu through the golden age of the Ottoman Empire.

Yet the current state of affairs for the Jews of Turkey is complex; in Izmir, for example, they can barely cobble together a minyan, although the city was once a leading center of Judaism, home to Rav Chaim Palagi, Rav Chaim Benvenisti and many other *gedolim* – and even, *l'havdil*, the infamous Shabbtai Tzvi.

On our most recent trip to Turkey, we wanted to close some of the gaps. We wanted to see how the Jews in outlying cities were faring, if there was anyone left to whom to offer our services or assistance. Did anyone need help in *shechitah* or baking matzos? Was there anyone who wanted us to run a Friday night service?

One couple we met in Izmir pretty much typifies the challenge of this dwindling community. He and his wife are by no means fully observant, but they are proud Jews who are continually learning more. Now, though, they have a major life dilemma. They and countless generations of ancestors have lived in Izmir. But there is no longer anything there for Jews. They have a married (to a Jew) daughter in Istanbul, and a single son living in the US, about whom he is concerned. His mind has been taken over by the question: should I move to Istanbul, the US, Israel, or stay put? His Hebrew is poor, his roots and job are in Izmir, but his children have left and Yiddishkeit in Izmir is on the decline. We obviously had no answer for him, but offered an ear of understanding and prayed that our visit gave him and the others a bit of strength.

Believers in Secret For years we've wanted to meet some real-life Donmeh, members of the secret sect of Shabbeteans, or continuing believers in Shabbtai Tzvi. And we came pretty close in Izmir, although our new friends would never admit it.

The strange saga of Shabbtai Tzvi, the false messiah, ranks among the most momentous, tragic events in Jewish history. A thumbnail sketch of the Shabbtai Tzvi debacle:

He was born on 9 Av 5386/1626 in Smyrna, the former Greek name for Izmir. Shabbtai was recognized as a precocious child who studied Torah, Talmud, and Kabbalah with the chief rabbi of Izmir, Rav Yosef Escapa. He was serious about his learning and practiced ascetic behavior. He was a handsome young man, with a beautiful voice and a magnetic personality. At about age twenty, however, his behavior began to become erratic. He had periods of excited dynamic and charismatic deportment, intermingled with times of depression when he retired to his room, not to emerge for days on end. In fact, these volatile mood swings continued to recur throughout his entire life, leading many scholars to label him as manic-depressive.

With his psychotic symptoms being manifest, he began to engage in non-halachic behavior. For example, he felt compelled to eat nonkosher food, including forbidden fats, and to commit what he called "holy sins." By 1648, he had announced to his followers in Smyrna that he was a messianic redeemer, verbalized Hashem's ineffable name and proclaimed that Yom Kippur was annulled. This was more than just strange behavior; it violated Torah laws with impunity, and led his esteemed teacher, Rabbi Escapa, to excommunicate him. He left Smyrna and traveled until he reached Egypt, where he was recognized as a troubled young man, albeit a Torah scholar. He heard of a man by the name of Nathan of Gaza who could heal troubled souls. He traveled to Nathan and the two immediately took a liking to each other. It was Nathan, a kabbalist and deep thinker, who actually proclaimed him the messiah. The "messiah" had found his "prophet."

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The Eastern European Jewish world had suffered the terrible Chmielnicki massacres of 1648, and the announcement of the arrival of Mashiach spread like wildfire. Shabbtai Tzvi was said to have performed awesome miracles, and "prophets" arose telling of his great deeds. Letters arrived in Europe with tales of the Ten Tribes reuniting and forming great Jewish armies to conquer Mecca or parts of North Africa and, after that, Jerusalem. Many people sold all their belongings to be ready to move to Israel on an instant's notice. No Jewish community was left untouched by the Messianic fervor and even some great rabbis of the age were swept up in the enthusiasm. The few "nonbelievers" were often punished or abused by the multitudes of "believers" or "*ma'aminim*" as they called themselves. Shabbtai Tzvi was said to have announced that he planned to go to Constantinople and place the sultan's turban on his own head, signifying his ascendance as king of the world.

The Ashkenazic synagogue in Istanbul is alive and well

These tablets fell off the façade of the abandoned Kirklareli synagogue and are stored away in the dusty attic

Kirklareli's deserted shul

That was the last straw. The sultan offered him a choice: convert to Islam or die. He converted. The depression that washed over the Jewish People was stifling. Many great rabbis were found to have believed in the hoax, and worse, many of his followers continued to accept that he was the Mashiach even after his conversion and his subsequent death in 1676. Those believers, the Shabbeteans as they are known, flourished for centuries. Some remained Jewish, yet secretly were "believers." Others followed Shabbtai in converting to Islam, behaving like Muslims on the outside yet feeling Jewish on the inside.

Incredibly, Shabbeteans continue to exist even today. We decided to find out more and went in search of the Turkish Donmeh, the secret sect of Shabbeteans. It seems that in modern Turkey, everybody knew *of* them, yet nobody knew them personally. We had heard the claims that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the legendary founder of the modern state of Turkey, was a Donmeh.

The Donmeh had their own neighborhoods, secret Jewish practices, and even secret symbols on their otherwise Muslim-looking gravestones, identifying them as belonging to the clandestine Shabbatean sect. In fact, for a short time in the last days of the sultanate, the stamps of the realm bearing the Turkish national symbol of a crescent moon and the five-pointed star actually included a Magen David, giving further indication of the silent guiding hand of the Donmeh, ever present behind the levers of power in Turkey.

We asked our acquaintances about the Donmeh and everyone gave an evasive response.

"Yes, I know them, but they are busy now," one person said when we asked to meet a member of the sect. Another person told us about a Shabbetean who comes to shul and is interested in converting back to Judaism, and promised that he would try to make contact for us.

Finally, on Shabbos afternoon, our chance to meet one of these secretive cultists came, as we climbed to the eighth floor of a building to be met by a man and his son who we were told were Shabbeteans. This Muslim dentist warmly wished us a "Shabbat Shalom," the only words he spoke that were not in his native Turkish. He proudly took out his Koran, but also immediately pulled his well-thumbed Tanach off the shelf, which is something no religious Muslim would have in his house.

It seems that one of the "eighteen commandments" the Shabbeteans follow is never to admit their membership in the sect. As we asked about various practices of the sect, he responded with a smile, "Of course I am not a Shabbetean, but I have heard such and such." He did admit that the first of his grandfather's three wives and his brother were believers. He also told us the remarkable story that while looking though his grandmother's trousseau after her death, the family found a piece of embroidered cloth with the image of a lion on it, and that this had been part of Shabbtai Tzvi's cape. A scholarly report has been written about this cloth, and indeed it is from the seventeenth century; but if he was indeed *not* a Shabbetean, what was this cloth doing in a box passed down from generation to generation in his non-Shabbetean family?

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We cut our conversation short in order to get to Minchah Gedolah, the only minyan for Minchah in the city. But Motzaei Shabbos again found us in the dentist's office. There we conversed with him and his American-educated son, who insisted he is aware of friends in the United States who are also hidden Shabbeteans. The father and son were extremely hospitable and convivial, albeit frustrating in their insistence that they don't know even one person who will admit to being a Shabbetean. Yet they were adamant that there are many believers, even some high in the Turkish government.

Apparently, the madman of Smyrna from the 1650s still has followers in today's world, and we finally may have even met some of them.

Five Jews and a Cemetery

On a previous visit to Turkey, our quick search of smaller Jewish communities near Istanbul yielded what turned out to be the interesting town of Kirklareli. Pre-trip research suggested the presence of a shul, cemetery, and five Jews, including an elderly rabbi. Facts on the ground were different. We were told that the keys to the shul are in the hands of the only Jewish couple left, and can be picked up at the gas station that they own.

The couple lent us one of their employees to escort us to the shul, which is barely notable from the street, with its courtyard doors blocked by a vegetable stand. Clearly it is not entered frequently. The key to the main sanctuary could not open the rusted lock, but thankfully the second-floor women's gallery lock simply fell off the rotting door. It was a small synagogue, built in a classical Greek style; even in its heyday it probably had no more than forty to fifty worshippers. But those days are gone forever and today the shul is unused and uncared for.

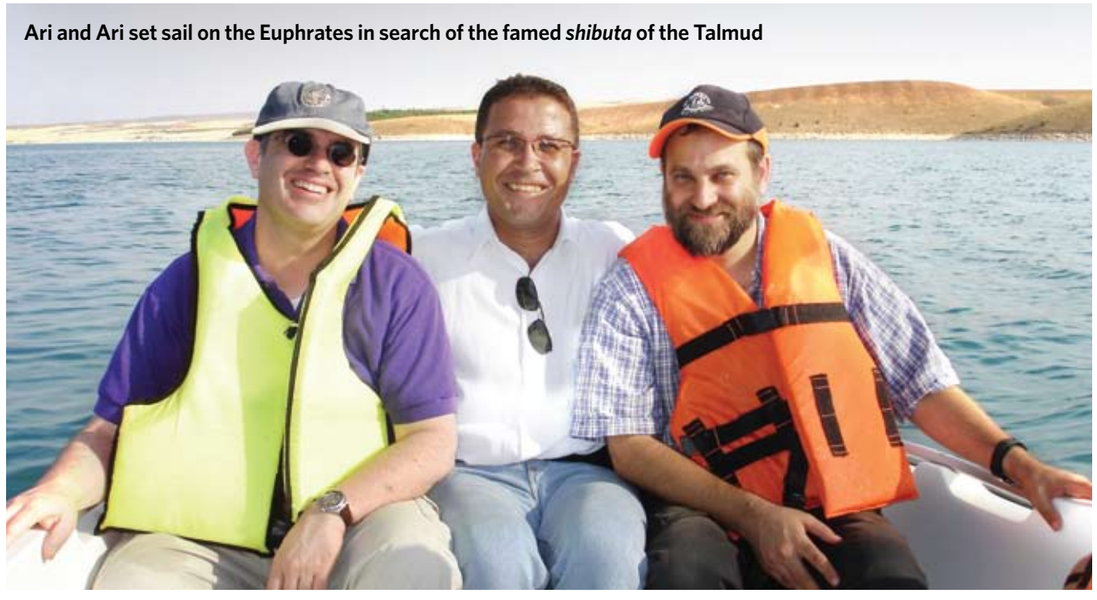
We proceeded to the cemetery, which is better maintained, with a brand new wall surrounding it; and while it is quite green, it is not overrun with weeds. The earliest tombstones date to the start of the seventeenth century and the newest to just a few years ago.

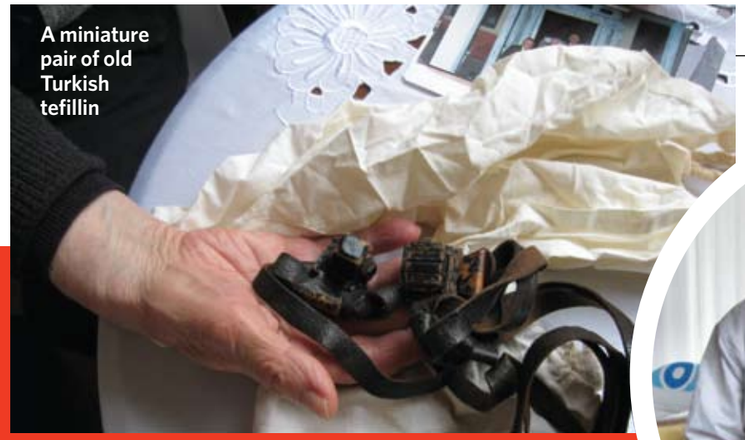
But most intriguing was the aged rabbi who had served Kirklareli for so many years. Rabbi Vitali (Hayim) Abravanel and his wife Esther have since reluctantly moved from Kirklareli to be near their two daughters in Istanbul. Today the rabbi is ninety years old and on our recent trip to Izmir, we made a detour to Istanbul to look him up.

Rabbi Abravanel was born in Edirne, a city not far from Kirklareli, which was once a truly Jewish town. It is there that Rav Yosef Karo, the Mechaber himself, wrote his *Beis Yosef*; until the early twentieth century, the town had over 20,000 Jews and many yeshivos. In 1903, a large fire destroyed thirteen of its shuls, and by 1984 there were a mere forty-eight Jews in Edirne. Today there are none. It seems that the last Jew of the city was Rabbi Abravanel's granddaughter Esti, today an Istanbul dentist, who graciously agreed to translate for me when I met her grandfather.

He showed me many of his documents, such as his *shechitah kabbalah*. He had been the itinerant *shochet* for

Ari and Ari set sail on the Euphrates in search of the famed *shibuta* of the Talmud




A miniature pair of old Turkish tefillin

Rav Abravanel shares his *shechita* approbation

over six decades in the small towns surrounding Kirklareli. It turned out that although he had been to Israel only for one brief trip, his Hebrew was good enough that we were able to communicate even after Esti left. While Rabbi Abravanel's hometown no longer has a Jewish community, his own family is still active in the Istanbul Jewish community.

Esti's husband, Ari, arrived and took us to Minchah in the local Caddebostan Bet El Shul, and it was a good thing he came or we would not have been able to pass the airtight Istanbul synagogue security. Rabbi Abravanel was a dedicated Jewish leader for over sixty years and today is still amazingly sharp and his memory is clear. It was an honor to meet such a man.

The Secret Inscription The most recent golden era for Jews began with the Ottomans' conquest of Bursa, just south of modern Istanbul, in 1324. The Ottoman sultan Orhan granted permission to build the Etz ha-Hayyim Synagogue, and it remained in continuous use for over 600 years. Just before the end of the Ottoman empire at the start of the twentieth century, its Jewish population peaked at approximately 200,000.

For close to 500 years, the sultan ruled one of the largest empires in the world. His court was one of unimaginable power and wealth, gifts of gold and jewels flowing into his coffers from around the globe. To visit his palace in Istanbul is to understand something of the magnificence of Achashveirosh's palace described in *Megillas Esther*. The massive palace complex at Topkapi, which was the official residence of the Ottoman sultans for approximately 400 years, was transformed into a museum of the imperial era in 1921. Its hundreds of rooms contain a large collection of porcelain, robes, weapons, shields, armor, and jewelry; a tour of its treasure vault reveals large bowls filled with rubies, gold ingots, and other priceless gems and metals. It even contains a dedicated circumcision room, which was built in 1640 for the sole purpose of circumcising the young Muslim princes.

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Because Eretz Yisrael was under Ottoman rule, many important archaeological finds of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made their way to this palace. While the museum is unimpressive from a professional standpoint in terms of preservation, labeling, and other technical functions, it does contain awe-inspiring exhibits, including many of significant Jewish value.

A number of these exceptional treasures, all located in a stifling second-floor hallway, bear mention. For example, the *mishnah* in *Middos* teaches — and Josephus records — that there were signs in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek posted outside the Beis HaMikdash that said, "No gentile may enter beyond the dividing wall into the court around the Holy Place; whoever is caught will be to blame for his subsequent death." Sure enough, one of the original such signs uncovered in Jerusalem sits in Istanbul. The famous Gezer calendar tablet, dating probably to the time of David HaMelech, is also found there.

The most fascinating item was the famous Shiloach inscription. Assyrian king Sancheriv, having already devastated the Northern Kingdom and exiled the Ten Tribes, then made his way south and began destroying the cities of Judea. Chizkiyahu HaMelech realized that Jerusalem was a prime target of Sancheriv, and among his preparations for its defense was securing the water supply to the city by digging a tunnel to bring water from the Gichon Spring through subterranean tunnels to the Shiloach Pool (See 2 *Malachim* 20:20; II *Divrei HaYamim* 32:2-4; and II *Divrei HaYamim* 32:30). It is not clear if Chazal approved of this effort, but by the grace of G-d, a phenomenal miracle occurred and the city was saved. The tunnel dug through solid stone beneath the City of David in Jerusalem nearly 2,700 years ago can still be traversed today.

In 1880, an Arab youth who was wading into the tunnel discovered an inscription in the ancient Hebrew script known as *ktav Ivri*, dating to the tunnel's creation. It told the story of how two independent groups of stonecutters providentially met underground to complete the tunnel and begin the flow of water. The inscription was soon thereafter cut from the wall and broken into fragments, and on their discovery, they were transferred to the Istanbul Archaeology Museum.

We had seen replicas in the Israel Museum and in the Ir David garden, but there is nothing like seeing the original. In 2007, Jerusalem mayor Uri Lupolianski requested from the Turkish ambassador to Israel that his country return the original inscription to Jerusalem, but Turkey rejected the request, claiming that it is the cultural property of the Turkish Republic.

When it was dug, the tunnel was the longest one built without intermediate man-made shafts. Its length, which is recorded on the inscription as being 1,200 *amos*, has halachic implications as well. Measured from end-to-end, it is approximately 533 meters, or 1,748 feet. Calculating the size of an *amah* based on those numbers yields an *amah* of about 44.4 centimeters or 17.6 inches, smaller than the shortest accepted measurement today, that of Rav Chaim Naeh, which is 48 centimeters. Even assuming that the 1,200 *amos* is a rounded-off number, it would be difficult to understand this according to the the Chazon Ish's 54 centimeters.

Avraham Avinu and the Shibuta On one of our previous halachic trips, we had the opportunity to go to south-central Turkey, just a few dozen kilometers north of the Syrian border at the headwaters of the Euphrates. Our primary goal was to find the fish mentioned numerous times in the Talmud by the name of "*shibuta*."

The Gemara relates that in Bavel, this fish was a delicacy that tasted like pork and was eaten by the Amoraim on Shabbos. Since the Euphrates, where the *shibuta* live, runs through Syria, Iraq, and Iran, we realized getting this fish would not be easy. Although we had already procured a fish called *shabut* in Arabic, pictures of which had shown it to be a kosher species, we decided to visit the town of Sanli Urfa, which the villagers simply call Urfa, in southwestern Turkey to see this fish firsthand in the Euphrates.

Tradition matches Urfa with Ur Kasdim, the city from which Avraham Avinu hails. South of Urfa is Charan, where Avraham's family settled and where he sent Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak. The stories of the well in Charan sprang to life in our imagination when, in the ancient city itself, we came across a huge stone over a well with a water trough for the town's sheep.

We left Charan for a meeting set up ahead of time with the local governor of the province, who would help us find live *shibuta*. Previous connections had led us to a researcher of this species, and before we knew it we were on a boat with him fishing for the *shibuta* of the Talmud. Next we were treated to an official meal with the local politicians and researchers, all on paper plates, with plastic forks and fresh *shibuta* cooked in double-wrapped foil over glowing coals.

While strolling through downtown Urfa, which was a mild 50 degrees Celsius (about 120 degrees Fahrenheit), we came across a series of mosques around a large pool emanating from a spring. We were told that the local legend is that Avraham was thrown by Nimrod via slingshot into a burning cave. Rather than being burned to a crisp (which we were feeling while we sweated as the story was told to us), Hashem performed a miracle and created a spring from the cave, which saved Avraham's life. This spring is the source of the pool that we were told contains "holy fish" that the Muslims come to feed. It is punishable by death to remove a fish. Which fish were they? The *shibuta*, of course. And

to answer the obvious question: Does it taste like pig? The answer is just as self-evident: how would we know?

At that time, we were on the way from Charan to Los Angeles for an OU-sponsored Mesorah Conference and Dinner, and wanted to bring the first *shibuta* ever to the US. We packed the frozen fish in our bags and went to the spanking new airport, which had literally opened that day, to catch the flight to Istanbul and on to the States. When we passed our bags through the scanner, we saw the astonished faces of the security personnel as they viewed what looked like two fish skeletons on the X-ray monitor.

Customs X-ray. What's a fish doing in a suitcase?

We saw the astonished faces of the security personnel as they viewed what looked like two fish skeletons on the X-ray monitor

We put our bags in the overhead bins on the plane, and all was uneventful until they started to defrost and drip. The passengers sitting in front of us were none too happy that the air-conditioning unit above them had started to dribble on them. We deemed it prudent to keep them in their ignorance, and not divulge that what was leaking was not the AC but defrosting *shibuta*.

The Prince's Islands Come the summer, the Jews of Istanbul head off to their version of the bungalow colony. They take a boat out to a group of islands forty-five minutes from Istanbul. The women and kids stay there, and the men commute to work in town. Last summer, we spent a Shabbos on the island of Byukada.

Byukada is like a time warp. No cars are allowed on the island, so when you get off the ferry, you behold the majestic site of elegant horse-drawn carts lined up in the "taxi" stand, and for a few pennies you are enchantingly transported to your destination to the clip-clop of hooves.

When you get off the ferry, though, you are met with the smell of horses and manure. We tend to idealize parts of the past without thinking about the reality. A thousand horses on a small island creates a unique ambiance, if you get our drift. If you look off to your right as you are driven though the town, you will see a restaurant with a Hebrew sign that says it's kosher. The hundreds of Jews on the island all summer have a kosher restaurant. It's not quite the Catskills — but then again, what is?

The synagogue is beautiful and close to 100 years old, and on Shabbos Nachamu, the Chacham Bashi, or the chief rabbi of Istanbul (once the title of the chief rabbi of the entire Turkish empire) comes to the island. On the Shabbos we were visiting, just before Musaf there was a hullabaloo, and we looked over to the entrance to see a procession of non-Jews filing in, two of whom were in police uniforms. We were quite concerned for a moment until we saw the convivial smiles of all the worshippers. The island's governor and police chief also have a *minhag* on Shabbos Nachamu. They come to synagogue, bless and welcome the chief rabbi in his splendor, and offer a warm message of love and companionship to the Jews. While the people we spoke to admitted it was a political move, we found it to be impressive. It was a nice message.

It also summed up the complicated history of the Jews of Turkey, a study in the complexities of Jewish existence in the Diaspora. Its zenith is long past, but its history still resides in the collective consciousness. From Avraham Avinu's birthplace, to the last station of the slaves taken from the Temple's destruction on their way to Rome; from those fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, to the honored Jewish doctors of the Sultan's court. The Chacham Bashi, wearing his long, traditional, embroidered coat, a sign of his appointment by the sultan as the undisputed leader of the Jews, hearkens back to better days, when the backbone of the community was Torah. But like every "Jerusalem" in the Diaspora, be it Lita, Izmir, or even Vilna, the halcyon days are short, for there is only one Jerusalem that is eternal, and it is in the Land of Israel.