Izmir's *Faded Glory*

Imprints of a rich past mark Izmir's present. A hanging silver oil lamp graces the Shaar HaShamayim Synagogue

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

MESORAH Quest with ARI & ARI

Centuries of vibrant Jewish life have left their fingerprints in the Turkish city of Izmir. The souk, the cemetery, even the hospital — all whisper of the Jews who lived and thrived here. On a recent visit, Ari and Ari soaked up the rich history in Izmir's unusual shuls and sites, and reacquainted the dwindling Jewish community with matzoh, Havdalah, and the true meaning of freedom

Several hundred years ago, the Turkish city of Izmir was one of the leading centers of Judaism. Yet today, the city that was home to Rav Chaim Palagi, Rav Chaim Benvenisti, and many other *gedolim* — as well as, *l'havdil elef havdalos*, the infamous Shabbtai Zvi — can barely cobble together a single minyan. With the city's Jewish population in precipitous decline, we seized the chance to visit while there were still children to teach, old men from whom to garner venerated traditions, and shuls from the sixteenth century that are still open to visitors.

Two communities had asked us to bake with them *shmurah matzoh*. During a stopover in a Viennese airport, we got an eerie hint at the irony of matzoh tutorials in Izmir: our reading material of choice was the mid-nineteenth century *Bitul Moda'ah*, the booklet printed during the great debate that permitted machine-made matzoh. The booklet's author, the famed Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson, the Shoel u'Meishiv, contended that matzoh of any shape was valid, since the venerable Torah community of Izmir had a tradition to bake square matzoh. Sitting there in the airport of Vienna, with a matzoh-baking trip to Izmir next on our itinerary, we felt the hand of history on our shoulders.

Izmir's Jewish heyday is a thing of the past. The former stronghold of Jewish life, historically known as Smyrna and home to tens of thousands of religious Jews, now houses about 1,500 Jews. Most of the city's 4 million residents have never met a Jew (though a recent poll showed a majority of Izmirites saying they wouldn't want to

have a Jewish neighbor). Where prominent rabbis, shuls, and yeshivos filled the streets, there is no longer even one Jewish school. Izmir's Jewish presence can still be seen and felt in unexpected places, however.

Not far from the old Jewish quarter is the Asansör (literally, the "elevator"), a popular tourist site. The elevator was built in 1907 to ease access between Mithatpaşa and Halilrifatpaşa streets, situated respectively in Izmir's Lower and Upper City and separated by a steep cliff that until then was traversed by climbing 155 steps. The elevator was initially water operated, but was replaced by an electrical version in 1985, and modernized in 1994. We entered the elevator tower, rode to the top, saw the amazing view of the Gulf of Izmir and the bay, and then rode back down.

On our way out, we did a double take: above the doorway was an inscription in Turkish and Hebrew, dated 5688/1907. It turns out that this wonderful addition to early twentieth-century Izmir was a private contribution by Jewish businessman Nesim Levi Bayraktaroğlu. He built it as a gift to the people of Izmir. It of course also benefited the Jews, who frequented many shuls located right near the bottom of the elevator, and another one in the neighborhood at the top, with the apt moniker of Rosh HaHar.

City of Shuls

As recently as a century ago, Izmir was home to approximately thirty-four operating shuls. With tens of thousands of religious Jews concentrated in the main market area of the town, it is not surprising that many shuls were built there as well. Thanks to the energy and devotion of one woman, Sarah Pardo, those shuls are being saved and restored for history. In 2004 all thirteen remaining shuls were declared World Heritage Sites because of their historical and architectural significance. But it was too late for some. The main shul that Rabbi Chaim Palagi had used was not long ago handed over by the Jewish community to the local municipality, which now uses it as a conservatorium. All that remains is the façade of the *aron* and a sorrowful portrait of Rav Palagi.

Early on our first day in Izmir, we (together with Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, who had come for the day) were fortunate to have Sarah Pardo share with us her expertise on the shuls and her historical knowledge of Jewish Izmir. We hopped in a cab with her and were off to the souk district. The souk is marked by Jewish fingerprints. Above one store was the symbol of the kosher wine merchant with a bunch of grapes, capped by the Hebrew year 5669.

Near the stalls, along the Havra Sokak ("Street of the Synagogue"), we found a fantastic collection of shuls. Long ago, nine small synagogues served the Jewish merchants and artisans working close by. Today three of these historic synagogues are still in use; many of the others are mere shells with no roofs or interiors. Each shul has its own name and flavor. From the outside they are nondescript structures but once you pass through the heavy gates, you enter a hidden world.

The Senora synagogue carries an unusual name. Where else is a shul named after a woman? But then again, Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi was no ordinary woman. Her shul, which has been restored, is surrounded by a lush garden of fruit trees. A rabbi planted an orange tree in front of the shul many years ago, and the local women believe that the fruits are auspicious for those who have difficulty conceiving. The back staircase of the shul features a collection of old tombstones discovered during the restoration project.

While they can get barely a minyan for weekday davening, to the community's credit, they cherish their shuls and try to daven Minchah in a different one of the old shuls each day. So on Friday we had a real treat when we davened in the Shalom (Aydinlis) Synagogue. As we walked down the alleys in the market we passed the dilapidated "Portuguese synagogue," purported to be the oldest of the shuls there. According to legend, this shul was appropriated by Shabbtai Zvi after he claimed to be the messiah. We had to gingerly dodge fifty or so Muslims bowed over during Friday prayers as we headed toward Minchah. Finally we reached the Shalom Synagogue.

This shul was originally built in the seventeenth century, restored in 1800 and 1841, and a wing for Ashkenazim was added in 1919. A more recent restoration was completed in 2005. What is fascinating about the Shalom Synagogue is its most unusual *bimah*. As in all the shuls in Izmir, it was intended to stand in the center of the building, and there were four pillars surrounding it. At some point in history it was moved to the back wall. It is unique because of its shape: built to resemble the prow of a boat, it was constructed by Anusim who fled to Turkey from Portugal in the sixteenth century. According to legend, they used the timber of their boat to build the *bimah*, as a testament to their salvation. We found seats

A souk crammed with shuls. Ari and Ari visit Izmir's "Street of the Synagogues," located in the city's busy souk

A Venerable Torah City: Izmir through the Ages

Izmir, which was known as Smyrna until recently, was home to Jews as early as the second century CE. Archaeological excavations have unearthed inscriptions — and possibly even milah equipment — from the early centuries of the Common Era. In 1530, the entire adult male population of Izmir numbered just 304. The influx of Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal helped transform Izmir into one of the leading trade centers of the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the seventeenth century, this bustling port had a population of about 90,000, including 7,000 Jews.

The organized Jewish community began in 1605, the first rabbi arrived from Istanbul in 1609, and in 1648, when Rabbi Joseph Escapa became chief rabbi, Izmir took its place as one of the most important Jewish communities of the Ottoman world. Rabbi Escapa had been a *rav* and *rosh yeshivah* in Thessaloniki, and wrote a commentary on the Tur called *Rosh Yosef*, all of which alone would have established his place in history. Unfortunately for him, he became better known as the teacher of the false messiah Shabbtai Tzvi, and then as the one who placed him in *cherem*.

There was a very active Jewish communal life in Izmir in the seventeenth century, which included some of the greatest *talmidei chachamim* of the time, such as Rabbi Chaim Benvenisti, author of the sefer *Knesset HaGedolah*; and Rabbi Chaim ben Yaakov Abulafia, author of the *Shvut Yaakov* on the *Ein Yaakov*. In 1772, a huge fire ravished Izmir, destroyed many of the shuls, and left the community so distraught that new shuls were not built until 1792. Jewish life then rejuvenated, and by the end of the nineteenth century there were an estimated 55,000 Jews in Izmir.

As the Ottoman Empire started to crumble, some Jews in Izmir looking for friendlier ports emigrated to the Americas, Western Europe, and Israel, leaving only about 25,000 Jews by 1905. Those remaining continued to occupy important positions, but the level of Torah observance went into steep decline. In 1922, following the Greco-Turkish War, another enormous fire destroyed many of the Jewish shops and homes. The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the Great Depression of 1929 led more Jews to leave, and by the 1940s the population had shrunk to only 10,000.

The establishment of the State of Israel prompted many Turkish Jews to make aliyah. Today, the Jewish population of Izmir is down to about 1,500 and the community is weak, without any Jewish schools left.

The Senora's Synagogue

Izmir's Senora Shul was named for Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi, an incredibly powerful, wise, and righteous woman. Born in 1510 to a wealthy family of Anusim in Lisbon, she was wed to her uncle Francisco Mendes, another crypto-Jew, who the King of Portugal at the time said was the wealthiest man in Lisbon. Their family developed a financial empire, with banking houses across Europe. Their fleets brought spices from the Orient. When Francisco died, this vast conglomerate was left in the hands of his young widow and their infant daughter.

Dona Gracia moved to Antwerp and quickly established an escape network for Jews from Portugal, who were forced to convert or die. As a secret Jewess herself, Dona Gracia always arranged backup escape plans during her meetings with the world's royal and influential figures.

By 1538, when her brother-in-law died, this twenty-eight-year-old woman was solely responsible for one of the larger family fortunes in the world. Naturally, her wealth brought influence. This attention from the likes of the pope, Henry of France, Charles of Spain, and Suleiman the Magnificent kept her busy deflecting marriage proposals. Escaping from Antwerp, she made her way to Venice, but a dispute there forced her to flee to Ferrara, Italy.

Interestingly, during her stay there, the first printed Tanach with a Spanish translation was published, and is known as the Ferrara Bible. Its more formal name was, "The Bible in the Spanish Language, Translated Word for Word from the True Hebrew by Very Excellent Literati, Viewed and Examined by the Office of the Inquisition [though the Inquisition would not have passed such a work] with the Privilege of the most Illustrious Lord Duke of Ferrara."

The importance and expense of such an undertaking should not be minimized, as it finally gave the Anusim the Tanach in a language they could understand. It is no wonder that the second printing is dedicated to Dona Gracia. It was in Ferrara that she finally publicly renounced Christianity and announced her Judaism. Once again she fled, and in 1553 she made her way to Turkey. In Constantinople, Dona Gracia used her vast fortune to support scholars, yeshivos, and the printing of Jewish books.

One final incident deserves mention. In 1555, the newly elected Pope Paul IV decided to rid the papal states under his rule of the Anusim, now openly following Judaism. About 100 Jews in the port city of Ancona were imprisoned and tortured by the Inquisition and sentenced to be burned at the stake. Dona Gracia petitioned the sultan for help, but despite her best efforts, a group of Jews was burned. For the first time in Jewish history since the Bar Kochba rebellion, this amazing woman initiated a proactive defense. Together with other Jewish merchants, she placed an international embargo on the important port of Ancona. While the embargo did great damage to the finances of the pope's city, it ultimately failed. (See Kolmus Issue #17 for details.)

Dona Gracia hoped to end her life in Eretz Yisrael, and even managed to obtain the area of Tiveria from the sultan. She then invested money developing the land. One could say it was the first attempt to help formally settle the Land of Israel in close to 1,500 years. So beloved and endeared was she that she was simply known to world Judaism as "La Senora," or "the lady." Rabbi Moses di Trani, paraphrasing *Mishlei* 31:29, referred to her Hebrew name of Chanah: "Many daughters have done virtuously, but Chanah has excelled them all."

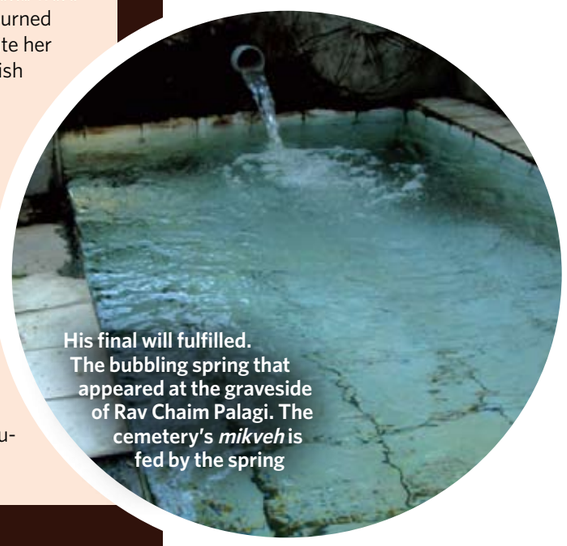
on the cushion-lined benches positioned around the walls of the square room.

After Minchah, the *chazzan* announced that the entire congregation would recite Birchas HaIlanos, the brachah of the new fruit buds made during Nissan. So the entire minyan, followed by a police guard, left the Shalom shul and walked to Senora Synagogue for a relatively long formal service, much of which was kabbalistic in nature.

Our minds could not help but wander back a few hundred years and imagine Senora Dona Gracia herself transported to the shul in her magnificent carriage, people bowing or nodding in respect to this most influential of Jewish women. She must have taken great pleasure in knowing that she saved so many Jews, and they had joined her to pray in the shul that she built. Maybe when she needed a break from davening, she strolled the same garden enjoying the budding fruit trees. For us, Jewish history is not about the past; it is about unifying the past and present.

Footsteps of History

The section of Izmir known as Alsancak is yuppie and upscale. Not surprisingly, that is where many of the Jews live today. This neighborhood's shul, Shaar HaShamayim, is the most active in Izmir. It hosts a daily minyan, as well as the Liga, the Izmir youth club, where we ran all of our programs.



His final will fulfilled. The bubbling spring that appeared at the graveside of Rav Chaim Palagi. The cemetery's *mikveh* is fed by the spring

The davening schedule for the upcoming week was quite confusing for us, so we called over the *gabbai* to help us decipher the dates. The month — Nisan — seemed right enough, but Yom Tov davening was scheduled for the 17th of Nisan instead of the 15th. To our surprise, we learned that the Turkish month is also named Nisan! The founder of the modern secular Turkish state, Atatürk, abolished the Islamic calendar for civil purposes. The names he introduced seem to be a mixture of other languages, with some reminiscent of the Jewish months, such as Şubat (Shvat) for February, Nisan for April, Temmuz for July, and Eylül for September.

Despite all the jokes about two Jews and three shuls, Izmir's main minyan doesn't often have competition. Only on Shabbos and Yom Tov mornings is there more than one minyan: one in Shaar HaShamayim, and another in one of the shuls in the market area. Shabbos morning we chose to daven in the Algazi Synagogue, named after the *gaon* and kabbalist Rav Yitzchak Algazi (1610–1683).

Right after Shacharis, the *gabbai* approached each of us independently and asked us to do *hagbah*, the lifting of the *Sefer Torah*. We figured this was a sure ploy to spark an argument over the honor. But immediately after the Torah was taken to the *bimah*, before reading any of it, they motioned for both of us to approach. It turns out that there are two significance differences between hagbah in Izmir and a standard Ashkenazic *hagbah*.

First, in accordance with the plain reading of *Meseches Sofrim*, and as ruled by the *Mechaber*, Rav Yosef Karo, they perform *hagbah* before the Torah reading. Second, they have two people raise the Torah: each holding the bottom of one of the *atzei chayim*, the wooden handles of the Torah, and placing his other hand on the back of the Torah (where there is a cloth covering) and then together raising the centuries-old Torah for the entire congregation to see.

Interestingly, it is a former *rav* of Izmir, Rav Chaim Benvenisti, in his sefer, *Knesses HaGedolah*, who justified the Ashkenazic practice of *hagbah* after the Torah reading. It seems that the uneducated felt that

Ari G. goes the "extra mile," hoping to find a scoop in a closed and crumbling shul

hagbah was more important than the reading itself, and after the Torah was lifted before the reading, they would leave shul for the day. The Ashkenazim therefore postponed *hagbah* until after the reading, to make sure that nobody left before the end of Kriyas HaTorah.

In addition to *hagbah*, we were honored to read the Torah for the congregation and to give the *drashah* that Shabbos HaGadol morning. When we stepped down from the *bimah*, we realized in whose footsteps we had trod and wondered if we had done justice to the memory of the great sages like Rav Chaim Palagi, who had *darshaned* in that very same spot so many years ago.

Interestingly enough, we located a book, called *Jews in Many Lands* by Chif Rabbi Adler of the British empre, written in the

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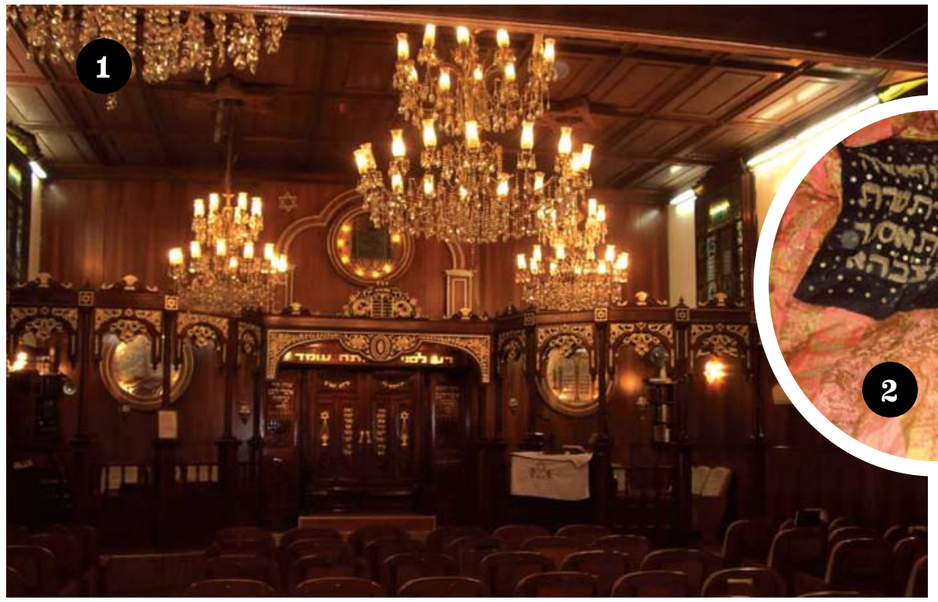
Shabbos is coming! Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, chief rabbi of Turin, Italy, showed us the Algazi Synagogue's bell, used to alert Jews in the souk that Shabbos was imminent

Testaments to history. Ari and Ari sort through the community *genizah* with thousands of books, some dating back to the seventeenth century



City of Shuls

Glimpses of Izmir's Historical Synagogues

1. The interior of the Shaar HaShamayim Synagogue

2. A beautifully vivid *parochet* dating back to the nineteenth century, found in Izmir's *genizah*

3. A spectacular *bimah* fom the sixteenth century, shaped like the prow of a boat. According to tradition, the Spanish exiles who found freedom in Turkey used the wood of their ship of refuge to construct this *bimah*

4. Traditional Torah crowns of the Ottoman empire

5. The main entrance to the Portuguese Synagogue. The shul, which dates back to the sixteenth century, was commandeered by Shabbetai Tzvi as his headquarters

6. Gold leaf and wood carving crown the *aron kodesh* in the Shaar HaShamayim synagogue

7. Ari Greenspan displays a unique Torah crown embossed with the crescent moon and star, symbols of the modern state of Turkey

8. A spectacular solid silver Torah case from the eighteenth century

9. Detail of an ancient silver ornament

10. Ari Zivotofsky in the recently discovered basement of the Algazi synagogue. To the left are tunnels linking the other shuls in the souk, which might have been a protective escape route in times of danger. Behind him is the Jewish prison cell used by the *beis din* to hold criminals

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1890s. He described the son of Rav Chaim Palagi:

As a stranger, I went to that of the orchim first, and here I was fortunate enough to find the vernable chief rabbi, the Chacham Bashi, Rav Abraham Pelago [sic]. He is a fine-looking man, with a long white beard, and his age is variously given as ninety, ninety-three, and ninety-five. His conversation is bright and animated, in Ladino by preference. But he talks Hebrew fluently and haswritten eighteen books in that language, some of them in poetry. He offered me sweet stuff made of quince, and some sort of Marzipan to eat and mastic to drink, and made me a present of the Machzor Romania. He could never hope to attain his father's quantity of bookmaking, for his father was still sixty books ahead, and "I am an old mannow," he said. Apropos, he is not the first of what I may call the Archipelagos, for his father, Rav Chaim Pelago, had been Arch-Rabbi before him. The natives naturally hold them both in the highest esteem, and tell a new story about the father which surpasses that of Newston's dog Diamond. There was a great conflagration in Smyrna in 1822 (there have been several since), and in the fire Rav Chaim lost fifty-four of his manuscript compositions. He did not despair, but rewrote, and afterwards printed and published every one. I am bound to say that Rabbi Abraham is not responsible for this wonderul story. But there can be no doubt as to the fecundity of authorship in both. It was an impressive sight to see the old man mount the lofty Tebah when called to the Law, and afterwards bless the congregation at the conclusion of the services as they filed past him, young and old, kissing his hand, which he then laid on their head saying, "Chazak baruch." He was the last to leave the synagoguew with his Meshareth, upon whose arm he leaned, walking with swift strides, but bowed with age.

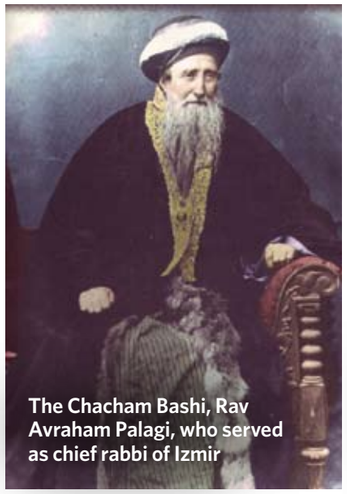
We had also been asked to daven Musaf, but it was fortunate we turned them down. Who would have guessed that their custom is to always say a *heicha kedushah* — that is, not to repeat the Shemoneh Esrei of Shabbos Musaf — similar to what we recently saw in Kenya (Mishpacha #352), and to what is practiced by the Yemenites and the Bulgarians until today. But when in Rome one should do as the Romans do, and when in Izmir do as the Izmirites do. Thus, during all the *tefillos* we fought our instincts and remained seated for every Kaddish, just as they do; tried to mimic the *Brich Shmeih* in Ladino, and imitate the various hand movements that accompany the beginning of Shemoneh Esrei and other parts of davening.

The most enjoyable part of our Izmir shul experience was after davening, when we had the chance to try their food. Every community has its unique cuisine, and Izmir is no different. The main drink at the *kiddush* looked like milk, but turned out to be a heavily sugared, white melon-seed juice! And when we discussed the Seder during Friday night dinner, we discovered that their *charoses* is quite different from ours and features red grapes.

Restoration of the Algazi shul has unearthed some surprising finds. Underneath the wooden floorboards was an underground crypt that had also served as a shul. The workers also discovered a small *beis medrash* as evidenced by a cabinet of very old seforim and a few *tzedakah* boxes, which today have been left as a display. They also came across tunnels, which seem to link some of Izmir's shuls together in some sort of hidden network. The most unusual thing was the small, low chamber they think was used by the *beis din*, the religious Jewish court, as a prison or holding cell for the accused. In this period, much like in other Sephardic lands, rabbis had the authority to settle legal issues.

Every Friday afternoon, the community still uses an ancient bell hanging from the outer gate to signal the approach of Shabbos. Long ago, when the souk was teeming with Jews, the sound of the bell alerted them to wrap up their business for the week.

Friday Minchah in one of the designated shuls in the souk



The Chacham Bashi, Rav Avraham Palagi, who served as chief rabbi of Izmir

Ari attempts to enter one of the closed shuls in the souk

When Rav Chaim Palagi's remains were transferred to the then "new" cemetery, a miracle occurred and a spring appeared under his grave

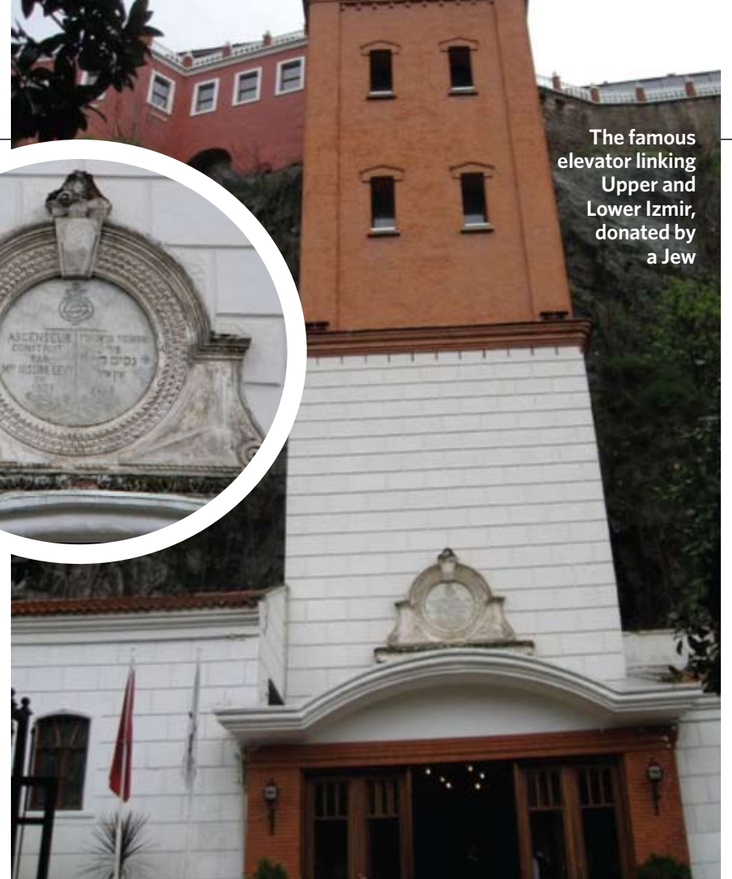
We noticed the absence of a women's gallery, and with a smile we were told the story. According to the legend related to us by the *gabbai*, Rav Palagi noticed one of the *chazzanim* trying to catch the attention of a woman in the gallery and he immediately ordered the section removed. However, two days earlier, on a guided tour, we heard a slightly different version: a young "rabbi" was seen eyeing a woman in the balcony, and it was the congregation that ordered the removal of the women's section, rather than the rabbi! In either case, today there is no *ezras nashim*, and if a woman comes, she sits near the back entranceway.

Spring of Purity

Though it seemed self-evident that Izmir would have many *mikvaos*, the current residents only knew of two. A ninety-year-old rabbi, the last *rav* of the town, who was housebound but had studied in yeshivah as a youngster, described for us the old days when he learned in yeshivah and was a *shochet* in Izmir. When we questioned him about *mikvaos*, he said that people would use the Muslim *chamams* (public hot baths) so common in this part of the world; these were spring-fed and thus accepted by some as *mikvaos*.

We queried if we could see the two current *mikvaos* in town. One, we were told, was in the cemetery just outside of town, and the other was in the entrance of the Jewish hospital. While few Jews now use this hospital, it once served the medical needs of the community. Occupying the top two floors of the original building is the Jewish old-age home with a handful of residents. On our first visit we found the *mikveh* downstairs, empty of water, but this gave us an opportunity to inspect it closely. When we returned on Friday morning we saw them filling it. Unfortunately, we could not figure out how the *mikveh* was kosher, as we could not find a *bor*, or natural water source, and we were told by the workers filling it that they use regular tap water.

Though the cemetery seemed an odd location for a *mikveh*, a visit to the site made things clearer. Among the great scholars who lived and taught in Izmir was Rav Chaim Palagi, who was born in 1788. He was amazingly prolific, and even



The famous elevator linking Upper and Lower Izmir, donated by a Jew

after twenty-six manuscripts were burned in a fire prior to printing, he managed to publish another twenty-six books on halachah and *aggadah*. His grave is located in a cemetery known as Gur Cesme, or the "old cemetery." As in many Muslim lands, a family lives on the cemetery grounds to take care of it and prevent vandalism.

When we entered, the first thing we noticed was a huge overgrown field, with graves going in every direction for hundreds of meters, all overgrown with weeds. The caretaker told us that there were over 8,000 graves in that large area. Most of the stones are not even visible anymore. This cemetery had been in use from the nineteenth century until the 1930s, when the new cemetery was opened.

The second thing we saw was a small, sparkling pool of crystal-clear, cold water that flowed into a nearby building. We were taken to the grave of Rav Chaim Palagi, which had been moved from an older graveyard to this one. In his last will he had requested to be buried near the water, and indeed the old cemetery was on the Aegean Sea. That cemetery, known as Barhi Baba, was in use from the seventeenth century until the early nineteenth century. At some point in the early twentieth century, the government realized the value of that land and ordered its closure and relocation, to make way for new urban development.

According to the local legend, when Rav Chaim Palagi's remains were transferred to the then "new" cemetery, a miracle occurred and a spring appeared under his grave in order to fulfill his last will. This bubbling creek is what feeds the little pool, and is the source of the constant flow of fresh water to the *mikveh* built a few meters away. The caretaker informed us that many "pilgrims" come to visit Rav Palagi's grave and immerse in the *mikveh*.

Another gadol buried there is Rav Chaim Benvenisti (1603–1673), author of *Knesset HaGedolah*, one of the preeminent books of halachah in the seventeenth century. He became the chief rabbi of Izmir, and the Chida said that his halachic rulings should be taken into account before making a decision.

One of his most famous rulings regards the swordfish. In recent decades this fish has been considered by most *frum* Jews to be nonkosher due to the difficulty in finding scales on it — as well as the fact that the Conservative movement permitted it. However, that was not the case in most of the communities around the Mediterranean, and is actually not the case today in places like Rome, Turkey, Tunisia, and Gibraltar, where, at least until recent years, it was regularly consumed.

Matzoh demo. Ari teaches the community how to bake matzoh in the traditional manner, on a "*sadge*" or heated metal plate

When they opened it, we saw shelves and shelves of old seforim, and boxes and boxes with more inside

The Knesset HaGedolah reported that although the "fish with the sword" does not appear to have scales, that is only because the scales are shed when it exits the water, and therefore it is indeed kosher. He also provides its name in the Spanish vernacular, *pez espada*.

To us, the use of Spanish by a Turkish rabbi seemed troubling. Now, after visiting the city, seeing the imprints of Spanish Jewry, and hearing Ladino still in use, it made perfect sense. We also saw that Izmir is indeed a magnificent port, a place in which the rabbi would certainly be familiar with the local fish.

The *Me'am Lo'ez* relates that the Knesses HaGedolah's grandfather had done an experiment to determine the halachic status of the swordfish. He describes him going out on the boat and seeing the fish fight in the water. He later described it shaking loose its scales, writing that he took a dark cloth and placed it in the net and observed that after the fish struggled, its scales could be found on the cloth in the net.

The Library in the Hospital

In addition to the dubious *mikveh*, Izmir's Jewish hospital also houses a hidden treasure, the community "library." This library languishes in silence, unappreciated by any of the residents, who cannot read or understand the seforim within. To her great credit, Sarah Pardo saved the seforim, which she found in the collapsed community center, waterlogged and left as rubbish. She understood their historic value and schlepped them to this room, and found a US graduate student to begin to catalogue them.

After taking an elevator in the Jewish hospital up one floor and traversing hallways to a different elevator in the old building, we found ourselves at a locked door with a gate inside. When they opened it, we saw shelves and shelves of old seforim, and boxes and boxes with more inside. We felt like the proverbial kids in a candy store. Many of the seforim date back to the 1700s. While not necessarily rare or expensive, they present a picture of a hugely learned community that was steeped in ancient traditions of scholarship. We could not help but wonder, as we opened a particular volume, who had learned it and when.

It was so moving to think about all the *talmidei chachamim* who lived here, and so sad to think about the complete loss of that tradition in a span of less than sixty years. Having had the pleasure of working in these sorts of forgotten *genizos* over the years, we rolled up our sleeves, braved layers of dust and mold, and spent three hours making some order out of the fifteen or so boxes of seforim, many of which were in Ladino, the old Jewish-Spanish dialect.

While we succeeded in separating the proverbial wheat from the chaff, and were able to sort and shelve the salvageable books, we realized there still is a lot of work to do. A full quarter or so of the

volumes on the shelves have never been added to the catalogued list. In addition to the seforim, there were boxes of Torah covers and belts, and about a dozen *parochos*, laid out on a hospital bed and covered with sheets. There were *mizrach* signs and amulets and wall-hangings from synagogues, along with a big, stone dedication plaque in Hebrew. We hope to go back one day and make order of the entire room.

Matzoh with Turkish Flavor

Our main reason for visiting Izmir was to do some pre-Pesach programming, the highlight of which is making kosher matzos for the Seder. We have been baking matzos ever since we built our first oven out of an old, free-standing stone barbecue thirty years ago. We have seen how exciting these baking programs are, as we have conducted them many times in Israel, Romania, and Bulgaria.

Though historical records describe the matzoh of Turkey as soft and handmade, nobody we spoke to in Izmir could remember that matzoh. In everyone's living recollection, matzoh was imported from Israel or Europe. There was an attempt to open a factory a few decades ago in Istanbul, but it failed. The stainless-steel equipment stands unused in a building in the courtyard of one of Istanbul's old shuls.

In Izmir, we visited what once was an old Jewish bakery in the Jewish quarter of the souk, now used to roast nuts, and the old man pointed up the street to a shop where there had been a matzoh factory. Sadly, those machines had been carted away about a decade ago, and nothing was left of those vibrant days.

For our matzoh tutorial, we came prepared with *shmurah* flour and a *reidler* (the hand-held instrument that makes holes in matzoh dough). We planned two matzoh bakings: one on Thursday night with the parents and children of the Sunday school (which usually meets on Friday nights), and the other immediately after Shabbos with the teens. Both sessions would take place in the basement of the shul, in what is called the "Liga," or youth social hall, where the kids come to meet each other. Fortunately, there is a very dedicated young coordinator who had advertised and organized the program.

Thursday night was a smashing success, with about forty people showing up for the program. The highly educated mothers were able to translate the halachos and instructions for their energetic children, and everyone learned about matzoh. Despite the great temptation to taste some of the matzoh (to which almost all of the kids succumbed), many people also kept some handmade *shmurah matzos* for the seder. This would be the first time they'd use handmade matzoh.

Tombstones engraved with Hebrew letters, recently found in the small courtyard behind the Senora Synagogue, now rest on a staircase

In order to prevent dough from getting reused (and thus rendered *chometz*), we asked all the participants to trim their nails and remove any rings. One mother did not have any pockets — but we had to insist that she remove her wedding band. One of us agreed to hold it for her in his pocket. Well, lo and behold, as we finished baking and were busy cleaning up, she left the building without her ring! Only a last-minute, sharp catch averted a minor catastrophe.

During our Friday night dinner, we discussed freedom and slavery, mentioning the community's Spanish roots and asking them to visualize Egypt and Spain. A haunting song drove the message home, and we explained that Seder Night is a "teaching moment," when the Jewish message is transmitted from one generation to the next.

As we prepared for the Motzaei Shabbos baking session, we realized that none of the participants would have heard Havdalah, and when we mentioned it to an organizer, he said to us that they probably had never even *seen* Havdalah before. We asked the men in the minyan if we could take their candle and some wine downstairs so we could recite Havdalah for the teens, but they said, "No, we'll never get it back." We found some Turkish-made, OK-certified wine in the fridge in the Liga, were smart enough to have brought some spices from Israel for just this eventuality, and lit two matches for Havdalah.

The kids were enthralled, especially when we inserted the Sephardic custom of everyone laughing out loud in the middle of Havdalah at the mention of "*la'Yehudim haytah orah v'simchah v'sason vikar*." After a short class on the laws of matzoh and *chometz*, we got started baking with a group of Jewish-Turkish teens. Since this was a smaller crowd, we got to speak and interact with the youngsters, and they really enjoyed their first exposure to a Jewish ritual.

We left Izmir just before Pesach, the patchwork of shuls, customs, and old tomes still vivid in our memories. We hope that the handmade matzoh brought a taste of freedom and tradition to the Jews of this fading community, and that for one night at least, their centuries-old heritage would shine with its former vibrancy.