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Locked away: Egypt’s forgotten Jewish literary heritage

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Library Of Jewish Heritage In Egypt At Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue- Photo Taken On May 15, 2014- YOUM7 Sami Wahib

By Samar Samir

Inside a library of a synagogue in downtown Cairo, hundreds of Judaic books dating from the medieval ages to 20th century are shelved, unread and un-indexed.

Despite a center dedicated to their preservation, government ministries have stalled, eschewing responsibility for what would be an expensive project to review and record the manuscripts digitally.



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Cultural history

Some of the shelved books date back to 17th and 18th centuries, while others are kept inside closed glass boxes, Hebrew Language professor at Ain Shams University Mohamed Hosni told The Cairo Post.

“The books are very important and rare. Some books are hand-written while others were donated by dignitaries,” Hosni added, “There are some books [so fragile they] cannot be touched lest they deteriorate.”

The *Jewish Heritage Library in Egypt* was established inside Cairo‘s Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue by the Jewish Community Council of Cairo in cooperation with Israeli Academic Center in Cairo during the tenure of former President Hosni Mubarak and was inaugurated on Oct. 25, 1988.

Most Egyptian Jews left the country in the 1950s, and of those who remained, the majority officially converted to Christianity or Islam. There less than 20 self-identified Jews estimated to remain in Egypt.

Head of Jewish Community of Egypt Magda Haroun has previously expressed her concerns over neglecting the library’s archeological and old books and rolls without digitizing and documentation.



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Inner courtyard of the Cairo-based Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue; the photo was taken on May

"I have no financial resources to open the libraries or even catalogue these books; there should be a librarian specialized in indexing. Unfortunately, these Judaic books exist in moist places and are at risk," she told Youm7 in an interview on May 15, 2014.

There are three other libraries in different synagogues, and a fourth library in The Ets Hayim Synagogue (Temple Hanan) with books discussing Karaite Judaism in Egypt.

Haroun said that Israeli and other Jewish international organizations have sought to acquire those books; they have also proposed to restore Jewish temples and tombs in exchange for the rare books, but she has refused all such offers.

Haroun noted that she has requested the Bibliotheca Alexandria to digitize the books.

Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandria Projects section told The Cairo

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Post via phone that documenting Jewish historical books in Bibliotheca Alexandria should be conducted upon a request from the Ministry of Antiquities as those books are preserved inside the archeological Jewish synagogues.



Head of the Jewish Community in Egypt Magda Haroun stands at the door of the library of Cairo synagogue- photo taken on May 15, 2014- YOUM7 Sami Wahib

However, the Ministry of Antiquities stated that it is not responsible for the care or review of the texts.

"The body authorized to be responsible for Jewish books and manuscripts is the Ministry of Culture," Mohamed Abdel-Latif, head of Islamic, Coptic and Jewish Antiquities Section of the Ministry of Antiquities, told The Cairo Post Friday.

Abdel-Latif added that a recent meeting between the Minister of Antiquities Mamdouh al-Damaty and former Minister of Culture Gaber Asfour, former head of Egyptian National Library and Archives (ENLA) Helmy al-Namnam (current Minister of Culture) to discuss this topic agreed that Jewish texts should remain inside the synagogues until they are able to be reviewed by the Ministry of Culture.

He stated that there are total of 19 synagogues registered by the Ministry of Antiquities.

"Institutional laziness"

Former Minister of Culture Gaber Asfour told The Cairo Post Tuesday that the delay of reviewing and documenting the Jewish books boils down to the "laziness of the ministry's employees."

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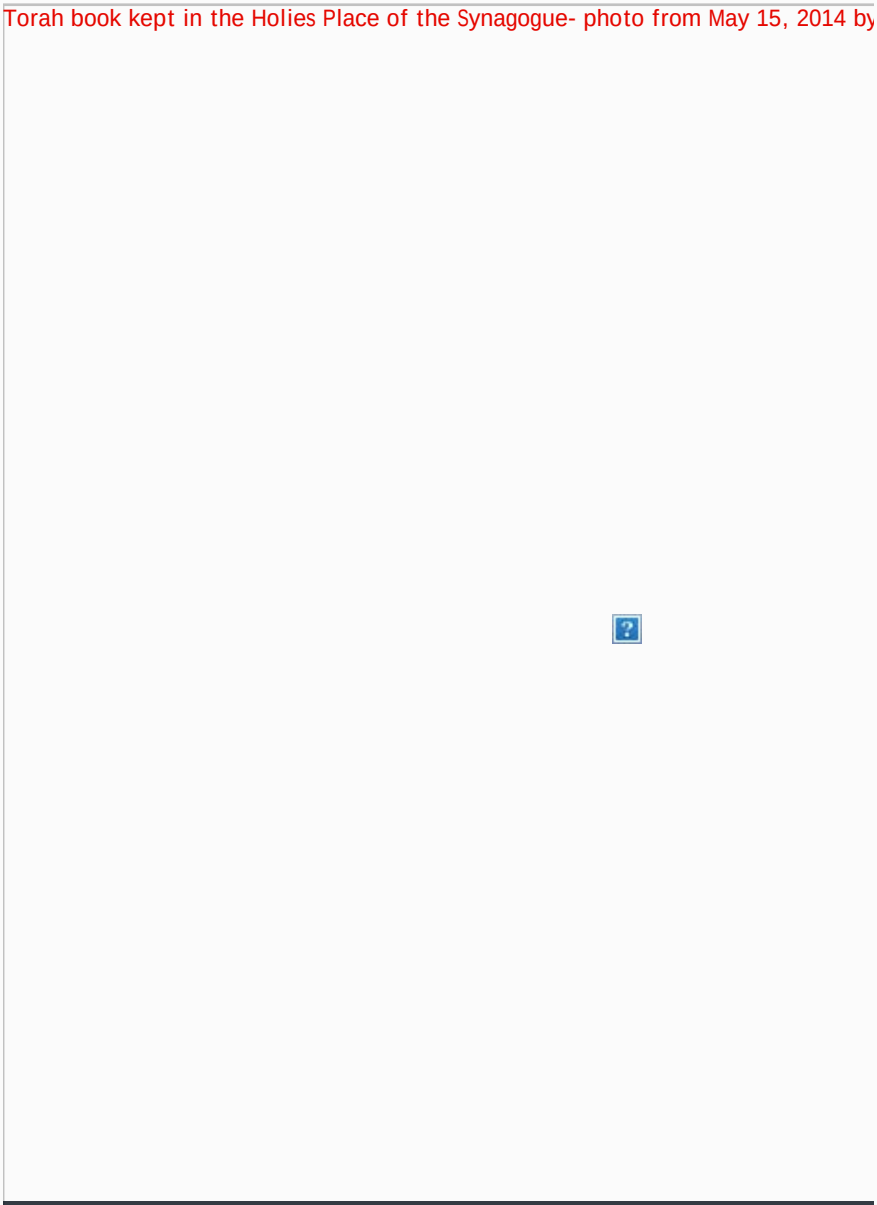
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"It has agreed that the ENLA will conduct a review and restoration for the books while the Ministry of Antiquities will conduct a review for the status of the temples," Asfour said.

He noted that the meeting was attended also by Haroun upon a request from the former Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahlab.

"Gaber Asfour's remarks are untrue…there is no laziness," said Namnam in an interview with The Cairo Post Saturday, adding that the meeting was held upon a complaint from Haroun against the Ministry of Antiquities over neglecting restoration of a Jewish temple in al-Mahala al-Kobra of Egypt's Delta.

Torah book kept in the Holies Place of the Synagogue- photo from May 15, 2014 by



Torah book kept in the Holies Place of the Synagogue- photo from May 15, 2014 by YOUM7 Sam

Namnam denied Asfour's statements that the meeting resulted in agreeing to form two committees of Ministries of Antiquities and Culture to "review and restore" the temples and the books.

He said that the meeting was held in March in 2015 and it has been agreed that the ENLA will "run" the synagogues libraries and the Ministry of Culture will consider the Jewish temples.

"The meeting was held upon a complaint from Haroun against the Ministry of Antiquities over neglecting restoration of a Jewish temple in al-Mahala al-Kobra of Egypt's Delta," he said.

"The Ministry of Antiquities has sent a team to the site of al-Mahala al-Kobra synagogue and they (the team) said 'it became some ruined bricks and we have no need for it'…the matter flares Haroun's anger," Namnam continued.

High cost of digitizing

Digitizing a small library could cost 100 million EGP ($12.5 million) and to restore "a page of a book could take a whole day," Nammam said.

"Mrs. Haroun went there [Biblioteca Alexandrina] upon an illusion…it does not have a very big number of the books," he added

"It [the library] has a zero experience in digitizing," he continued, adding that the ENLA's project of digitizing has being conducted.



The Cairo Post reporter interviewing Minister of Culture Helmy al-Namnam at the Ministry head
THE CAIRO POST/ Amr Mostafa

Nammam denied the significance of the Jewish genre of books as a whole; adding "there is nothing called 'Jewish books in Egypt,' the books scientifically should be classified as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, etc."

Responding to Haroun’s concerns about pressures on her by Israel and Jewish organizations, al-Namnam said “the books are Egyptian and no country has right to call for them.”

He also dismissed the idea of Israel could offer financial support for restoration, saying “at the end Israel will not ask and we will not accept.”

The books for now remain shuttered in their cases in the forgotten synagogue tucked into Cairo’s bustling downtown.

Additional Reporting by Mahmoud Mohey

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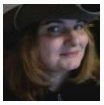
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Amy B.

December 31, 2015 at 7:41 am ▪ Reply

They should be given to Israel to preserve. Original international announcement of this collection. “http://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/10/arts/ebbing-life-a-library-memorializes-egypt-s-jews.html”

Dr. Hayim Y. Sheynin

January 1, 2016 at 1:33 am ▪ Reply

There is do doubt that all manuscripts, archival documents and printed books must be catalogued, restored and digitalized.

Alan Mazursky

January 1, 2016 at 1:33 am ▪ Reply

It looks like no matter what type of spin the Ministries try to put on this, it boils down to neglect, and more accurately intended neglect. This isn’t just bureaucratic snafu’s.

Meir L. Masri

January 1, 2016 at 6:56 pm ▪ Reply

C’est une très bonne nouvelle. L’Egypte fait des progrès depuis quelques années. Bravo. Thya Masr wa ‘Ash yahud Masr!

I Levy

January 4, 2016 at 11:36 am ▪ Reply

I’ts time for the Israeli Goverment to be solicited to intervene together with internatinal bodies to restore ownership & responsibility.

Jojo Skandarani

January 12, 2016 at 1:20 am ▪ Reply

Majority of the Egyptian Jews, forced to emigrate from the country and most of them emigrate to Israel and live Bat-Yam.

Jojo Skandarani

January 12, 2016 at 1:21 am ▪ Reply

It will be appropriate to give these books to the original owners (The Jews of Egypt) .

Send the books to Bat Yam Egyptian Synagogue in Nitzana Street in Bat Yam.

Jojo Skandarani

January 12, 2016 at 1:23 am ▪ Reply

Instead of showing of power.
No one need the books in Egypt and no one care.

Jojo Skandarani

January 12, 2016 at 1:25 am ▪ Reply

It have to come as a good will from the Egyptian government, nothing to do for they Israelis to be involve in dispute with the Egyptians,

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