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The Last Jews of Cairo

By Josh Weil
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On the eve of Ramadan, in the center of the Arab world, we found ourselves – two agnostic Jews with no interest in or ties to the Jewish community back home – [scrambling] to join in prayer and worship with the remaining Jews of Cairo.

As soon as we saw the guns, we knew we'd arrived at the synagogue. Egyptian policemen thronged behind barricades, white uniforms in the dusk, handguns at their hips. Above them, on stairs, Special Forces soldiers in black with red armbands held machine guns as easily as we did point-and-shoot cameras. They eyed us through slits in iron shields, slits cut for shooting back at whatever might shoot at them. And all this on any given day at the Chaar Hashamaim synagogue on Adly Street in the heart of downtown Cairo. The bomb-sniffing dogs, the metal detectors, the Israeli security agents, bulletproof vests outlined beneath their suit jackets: Those were how we knew it was a holiday.

In Egypt, on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and day of repentance, we paused, leaning into the window of a taxi, before we asked the driver to take us to the synagogue. We didn't bring anything bulky in our bags. We did bring our IDs. The synagogue provided the yarmulkes. There were a dozen of us: Muslim Americans, Christian Americans, Jewish-Agnostic Americans. We had come to Cairo for disparate reasons – to write, to work, to attain fluency in Arabic – but we had come to the synagogue that night for the same reason. To experience a service in Egypt.

On our own, we had begun to understand the small vagaries that pepper Jewish life in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. "Let me ask you something," a Muslim salesman had insisted the day before, "are you a Jew? I am asking not because you are trying such bargaining..."; another declared over dinner, "everyone knows the Jews are behind everything," before lauding the Muslim Brotherhood; Holocaust denials are as commonplace as the headlines in the newspapers that rail against the "Zionist enemy." But our knowledge of what life was like for the Egyptian Jews – if there even were enough left to warrant their own category – went only as far as the passing references to long-gone Jewish "millionaires" in the recent Egyptian movie *The Yacoubian Building*. Which left us wondering where did that vibrant Jewish community go and why, and, especially, what happened to those who stayed. And so, on the eve of Ramadan, in the center of the Arab world, we found ourselves – two agnostic Jews who thought we had no interest in, let alone ties to, the Jewish community back home – submitting to a host of ID checks and metal detectors and glares from passersby in order to join in prayer and to worship with the remaining Jews of Cairo.

The Dissolution of a Community

To have stayed when everyone else left, to live as Jews among a population that sees Jews as Zionists and Zionists as the blood enemy, to flaunt their Jewish identities on the streets of Cairo by daring to climb synagogue steps for a Friday night service—surely if there was ever a community in need of the bulwark of fundamentalist religion, this was one.

Historically, the Jews of Egypt were an affluent and powerful community. A significant part of a cultured intellectual class, they conversed in French, sent their children to private schools, and controlled many of Egypt's largest banks and businesses. All the while mingling freely with their Muslim and Christian counterparts as both business partners and friends. Some even intermarried. The prominent Suares and Qattawi families were influential in the Egyptian chamber of commerce; Rene Qattawi served as the leader of the Cairo Sephardic Leadership Council; and both families held close ties to Egyptian royalty.

As European and American Jews began to unite under the banner of Zionism during the early 20th century, Egyptian Jews held tight their local social and cultural ties. Many even aggressively opposed the movement. The manifesto of the Association of Egyptian Jewish Youth decreed, "Egypt is our homeland, and Arabic is our language." And, in a letter to the World Jewish Congress, Rene Qattawi urged the organization to reconsider their call for a Jewish state; as an alternative, he suggested Egypt as a destination for Jews fleeing Eastern Europe.

Nonetheless, the Egyptian Jews eventually found themselves caught in the crossfire of growing animosity between the Arab world and the Zionist movement. In the 1940s, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem helped to incite a series of pogroms against the Egyptian Jewish population. With the overthrow of King Farouk in 1952 and the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism, the situation only grew worse. Many of the wealthier Jewish families left Egypt, emigrating to Europe, the United States, and Israel. During the Sinai campaign of 1956 (a four-month war against British, French and Israeli forces over the control of the Sinai peninsula and adjoining waterways), the Egyptian Ministry of Religion issued a decree declaring "All Jews are Zionists and enemies of the state." Thousands were expelled.

In 1948—the year the Jewish state of Israel was founded—the Jewish population in Egypt was over 75,000. Today's population is a shadow of its former self. Less than 100 Jews, most of them elderly, live divided between Cairo and Alexandria, the former centers of the Jewish community. Surely, we thought, these last hundred Jews must have a rare and ardent devotion to their religion. To have stayed when everyone else left, to live as Jews among a population that, overwhelmingly, sees Jews as Zionists and Zionists as the blood enemy, and, even further, to flaunt their Jewish identities on the streets of Cairo by daring to climb synagogue steps for a Friday night service—surely if there was ever

a community in need of the bulwark of fundamentalist religion, this was one.

Cultural Crosswinds

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As we entered Chaar Hashamaim the night of Rosh Hashanah, the synagogue betrayed its long-ago grandeur with the subtlety of an aged woman once renowned for her beauty. The dome over the central hall didn’t so much soar as allow the place to breathe. The walls were painted a quiet blue and along the trim, faded gold Stars of David glimmered faintly. Sitting on the bulky dark-stained pews, we felt as if we were lowering ourselves into the past.

Separated by the main hall — women sat on the left, men on the right— we took in the worshipers. Hunched beneath their yarmulkes, a few old men held prayer books; elderly women in finery greeted each other with the warmth of lifetime friends. From across the room, we exchanged glances: This was going to be a service steeped in ritual and faith like we’d never seen before.

But it wasn’t. As the aged congregation wandered in, their conversation drifted between French and Arabic. They milled about, greeting each other with kisses and “Kol sana wa enti tayyiba,” the traditional Muslim holiday greeting and well-wishing for a good year. When a staff member of the Israeli embassy strolled over and greeted the group with “Chag samayach,” he was met by an awkward silence and blank stares. Finally someone whispered, “That’s Hebrew for kol sana wa enti tayyiba,” and everyone sighed and nodded, their appreciation tinged with awe.

Cairo has no Rabbi, so one had to be flown in from France for the High Holidays. He hadn’t been speaking for more than a minute when a cell phone shook the quiet. An old woman answered, made herself comfortable in her pew and settled in for a good chat. A man drew out his camera, crossed to the women’s side, snapped a few pictures as worshipers posed and grinned, then turned to click off some frames of the kids who had been loosed to run wild about the room. Every few lines, the Rabbi attempted to get the congregation to join him in prayer. But his encouraging smiles, his flapping arms, were all in vain. The Egyptian Jews – those who weren’t chatting or posing for pictures – stared back, mute. An old woman leaned in to her friend and whispered, “What holiday is this again?”

As the service wore on, it became clear that none of the Egyptian Jews could read Hebrew. The only people who followed along with the Rabbi were the Israelis from the embassy. When the Rabbi left his

place on the *bima* and crossed to the ark where the Torahs were kept, the entire room seemed relieved at the promise of an action it could understand. The Rabbi pulled back the emerald green curtain embroidered with curling grape vines; the ark doors opened. At the sight of the ancient Torah scrolls, their velvet casings worn by the hands of so many generations of Egyptian Jews, the congregation quieted at last. And the Rabbi's lilting prayer filled the hall. But too soon the doors were shut. And beneath the din of renewed chatter, the Rabbi, unable to figure out how to close the curtain, summoned the synagogue's Muslim caretaker to draw it shut.

At the service for Simchat Torah, which we would attend two weeks later, three ancient scrolls were actually taken out of the ark and paraded around the room. For the first time since we'd begun attending services, the congregation displayed a real religious intensity. As each Torah passed by, the old Egyptian Jews grasped it, touched it, and kissed it with so much fervor that the men carrying the scrolls had to pull away. But even this flew in the face of accepted religious observance. In Judaism it is sacrilegious for members of the congregation to touch the Torah with bare hands; normally, prayer books and *talits* are the only things used to make contact. But this was not a synagogue where traditional rules of Jewish conduct were applied, or even known. This community, the last remnants of Egyptian Judaism, lacked even some basic understandings of Jewish law and common practice. It was only through physical interaction with the Torah – that tangible, immediate symbol – that they seemed finally able to engage with something that set them apart from the rest of Egyptian society.

By the time the Rabbi, back on the *bima*, announced that there would be one more prayer to end the Rosh Hashanah service, we should have surrendered any expectations we had carried into the synagogue that night. Still, the words he spoke to close the service shocked us: "God bless Mubarak; God bless Israel; God bless the Palestinians. Insha'allah, there will be peace." And as the group rose from their seats and moved toward the table of wine and sweet foods, traditional Jewish well-wishing was conspicuously absent; in its place murmurs of "Insha'allah it will be a good year" filled the room as people hugged and kissed cheeks.

Neither of us ever imagined that we would hear the Arabic-Muslim expression, "Insha'allah"—God willing—uttered in a synagogue. But perhaps we *should* have expected this. In assuming that the last Jews in Egypt would cling fervently to all things Jewish, we were foisting on them the same sort of stereotypes used in equating all Jews with Zionists.

For it soon became clear that this community was much more of a hybrid than a homogenous island—a surprisingly easy blend of the traditions of old Jewish culture and the Arab-Muslim society in which it exists. Esther, an elderly Jew from the community, attends every religious service with her daughter who covers her hair in accordance with the Islamic tradition of *hijab*. Esther married a Muslim man and, as Islamic law dictates, their children were all raised Muslim. And Esther's daughter wasn't the only woman in *hijab* at the service that night. Several other Muslim sons and daughters accompanied their single Jewish parents. This Jewish community and its Muslim relatives moved and conversed so naturally together that it was easy to forget this was not the norm on the streets of Cairo.

Still, many of the older men and women spoke with great pride of their Jewish aristocratic roots,

nostalgic for the old days of Jewish high society. When asked about the younger generation, their faces fell. “There are no more young Jews in Cairo these days,” Esther said. The rest nodded. Then one smiled and pointed to an 80-year-old man hunched quietly in a corner: “That’s the youngest Jew left in Cairo.” They all burst into laughter.

After the Rosh Hashanah service ended, the congregation gathered to celebrate over food that was just as much a vessel for cultural traditions and as the dusty scrolls stored behind the uncooperative green curtain. And yet those foods were testament to the amalgamation of traditions as well. There, apples and honey mingled with pomegranate seeds and fresh figs; *gefilte* fish shared the table with the honey-drenched sweets found in all of Cairo’s neighborhood bakeries; and the *baba ghanoush* was washed down with sweet, cloying wine – a hallmark of Jewish holidays.

Comfort in the Past

In a part of the world where religion had become a defining element of ongoing conflict, there may be even greater reason to cling — consciously or subconsciously — to a distant past.

It’s clear that to these last members of the Egyptian Jewish community that Jewish heritage is immensely important. But amid shrinking numbers and increasing assimilation, their ability to evoke this heritage has withered to a few tangible remnants: the people, the Torah, the food. Ultimately, it isn’t religion at all to which this small remaining cluster of Jews is clinging; it’s to each other.

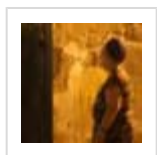
In a part of the world where religion had become a defining element of ongoing conflict, there may be even greater reason to cling—consciously or subconsciously—to a distant past, to the common identity found in traditions and in ceremony. Yet here, the substance of the religions themselves buried any political identities they bequeath. We had come to the synagogue expecting to find a religious fervor hidden amid a thriving and often hostile Muslim environment. Instead we found little more than a cluster of the elderly, the last of a dying breed—too old and too tired to make any real attempt at a Jewish revival.

While Adly Street slowly comes to life each morning with vendors, pedestrians, taxis, and the vibrancy of a predominately Muslim community, the Chaar Hashamaim Synagogue rests in the shadows. Doors shut, the empty hall inside as still as the Star of David carved into its façade, just one more remnant of antiquity in Cairo – *Umm Al-dunya*, mother of the world. At the end of the street, the sun cuts across Ubra Square, hitting the Al-Azhar highway where the overpass rises above the sprawl and curves gracefully out toward the endless surrounding desert.



Josh Weil has published fiction in *New England Review*, *New Letters*, *West Branch* and *Harpur Palate*, among other journals. His non-fiction has appeared in *Orion Magazine* and *The Athens Messenger* and is forthcoming in *The New York Times* and *Sage Magazine*. He is currently a Fulbright Fellow in Egypt where he is researching and writing a novel about the Arab slave trade.

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