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## Title: Rehabilitation of Moses El-Diri Synagogue : Guide to Adaptive Reuse

### ABSTRACT

The Moses Al-Diri Synagogue in Abbasiya, Cairo, is an overlooked treasure of Jewish heritage, remaining largely unknown despite its profound religious and cultural significance. Once a vital part of Egypt's Jewish community, it now stands shuttered and unused, reflecting the decline of the Karaite sect, a now-rare branch of Judaism. No rituals are performed there, and Egypt's Jewish population has dwindled to a mere fraction of its former size, with only about a hundred individuals remaining in Alexandria and an aging, scattered community primarily concentrated in Cairo. Outside these cities, Jewish life in Egypt has nearly vanished, placing the community and its rich legacy at risk of extinction.

This article sheds light on the importance of preserving Egypt's Jewish heritage as an integral part of its diverse cultural history, alongside its Islamic and Coptic traditions. While some synagogues have undergone recent restoration efforts, many historically significant sites, including the Moses Al-Diri Synagogue, have not received the same attention. The rehabilitation of this synagogue presents an opportunity to honor and revitalize Jewish heritage. By restoring this historic site and inviting people from around the world, we aim to breathe new life into Egypt's Jewish legacy, ensuring its preservation while fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the country's multicultural history for future generations.

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## العنوان: إعادة تأهيل كنيس موسى الدرعي: دليل لإعادة الإستخدام التكييفي الخلاصة :

كنيس موسى الدرعي في العباسية، القاهرة، هو كنز مهمل من التراث اليهودي، لا يزال مجهولاً إلى حد كبير على الرغم من أهميته الدينية والثقافية العميقة. كان في يوم من الأيام جزءاً حيوياً من المجتمع اليهودي في مصر، لكنه الآن يقف مغلقاً وغير مستخدم، مما يعكس تراجع الطائفة الكارائنية، وهي فرع نادر من اليهودية. لا تُمارس هناك أي طقوس، وقد تضاعف عدد السكان اليهود في مصر ليصبح جزءاً صغيراً من حجمه السابق، حيث لا يتعدى عدد الأفراد المئتين في الإسكندرية، بينما هناك مجتمع مسن ومنتشر يتركز أساساً في القاهرة. خارج هاتين المدينتين، اختفت الحياة اليهودية في مصر تقريباً، مما يضع المجتمع وتراثه الغني في خطر الانقراض.

تسلط هذه المقالة الضوء على أهمية الحفاظ على التراث اليهودي في مصر كجزء لا يتجزأ من تاريخها الثقافي المتنوع، إلى جانب تقاليدنا الإسلامية والمسيحية القبطية. بينما شهدت بعض المعابد ترميمات حديثة، فإن العديد من المواقع التاريخية الهامة، بما في ذلك كنيس موسى الدرعي، لم تحظ بنفس الاهتمام. إن إعادة تأهيل هذا الكنيس تمثل فرصة لتكريم وإحياء التراث اليهودي. من خلال ترميم هذا الموقع التاريخي ودعوة الناس من جميع أنحاء العالم، نسعى لإحياء التراث اليهودي في مصر وضمان الحفاظ عليه، مع تعزيز الفهم والتقدير الأعمق لتاريخ البلاد متعدد الثقافات للأجيال القادمة.

### 1. Introduction

Biblical times are the starting point of the history of the Jews in Egypt. During the reign of the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep IV, also known as Akhenaten (1375–1358 BC), the Israelite tribes made their first migration to the Land of Goshen, which is the northern edge of the Nile Delta. Jews were sold into slavery by Ramses II (1298–1232 BC) so that the Pharaoh might use them for his construction projects. Under Merneptah, Ramses' successor, anti-Jewish practices persisted, and in 1220 BC, the Jews rose up and fled across the Sinai to Canaan. On the occasion of Passover, we celebrate this historical Exodus<sup>i</sup>.

This report's primary goal is to raise awareness of and encourage greater preservation of Egypt's Jewish heritage, particularly its synagogues. Egypt has nineteen Jewish synagogues, which are dispersed throughout the governorates of Alexandria and Cairo. Before the Jews departed Egypt in the 1950s, there were regular religious rituals performed there. There are 11 registered synagogues in Cairo, the most significant of which is the one on Adly Street in the heart of the city, where religious festivals are held.<sup>ii</sup>

President of Egypt Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has committed \$171 million, or one billion and 270 million pounds<sup>iii</sup>, to reviving Egypt's Jewish history. Sisi's declaration at the World Youth Forum in Sharm El-Sheikh, east of Cairo, that there are no barriers to the construction of synagogues for Jews was made prior to the announcement of the restoration of Jewish heritage. He stated, "If we have Jews, we will build temples for them, because this is the citizen's right to worship whatever they want." Moreover, this was the President's response to the Jewish organizations in Cairo and Alexandria that wanted to "save the Jewish heritage." In the

midst of all these restoration and conservation efforts, some temples—like the Moses Al-Diri synagogue in Abbasiya (Abdo Basha Area)—need additional work in conservation and restoration. For this reason, we are highlighting this synagogue in this report. Our proposal is to renovate this synagogue and make it accessible to tourists from around the globe in order to revitalize the Jewish legacy.



## 2. The Synagogue of Moses Al-Diri

### 2.1 Location:

It is located in Sabil Al-Khazindar St. , or now called Ahmed Saeed St. Near Air Force General Hospital, in Abbasiya (Abduh Pasha), in the city of Cairo, Egypt.



Figure 1, Location, google maps



Figure 2: Street Network Analysis, google maps

### 2.2 Historic Background:

The Temple of Moses Al-Dari, also known as the Moses Al-Diri Temple, stands as a Jewish synagogue dedicated to the Karaite Jewish community. Commissioned by Rabbi Tobias, the leader of the Karaite community in Egypt, it was named after the esteemed Jewish poet. Sittah Al-Masfi, a Jewish woman, generously contributed a parcel of land in the Abbasiya neighborhood along with a significant sum of money for the construction of the temple, serving as a focal point for the Karaite Jewish congregation seeking to move from congested areas to Abbasiya. Construction commenced in 1900 and concluded in 1925 AD<sup>iv</sup>.

Recognized as an antique under Prime Minister's Decision No. "2107" of 1997 AD, the temple has remained closed for years, due to the decline in adherents following the expulsion of Jews from Egypt during the tenure of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser. These synagogues abstain from conducting religious ceremonies, partly due to ritualistic reasons and the limited Jewish population in Egypt<sup>v</sup>. Only a prayer gathering of ten men, surpassing the sect's current membership count, is required for religious observances within the temple<sup>vi</sup>.

### 2.3 Restoration and conservation works:

Among the restoration work done in 2018 by the Egyptian President for all jewish temples, was the restoration and conservation work done in the synagogue of Moses Al-Diri. Figure 3<sup>vii</sup> shows restoration work of the facade and figure 4<sup>viii</sup> shows after it was restored.



Figure 3: during restoration



Figure 4: after restoration



In figure 5, a timeline diagram is displayed to conclude what happened to Moses El-Diri Synagogue till now

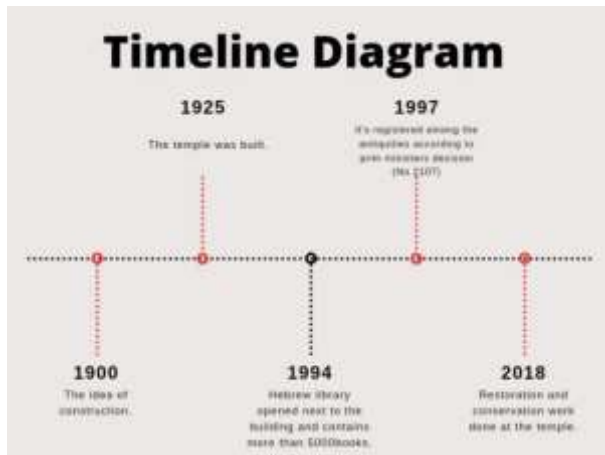


Figure 5: Timeline of Moses Eldiri  
By authors



Figure 7: The surrounding area around Moses Eldiri

**2.4 Current Situation:**

The head of the Jewish community must grant permission for visitors to enter the closed synagogue. Not only is there a limited Jewish population in Egypt, but there is also a reason why religious rites are not performed in these synagogues. Only ten men, more than the number of the sect itself, are required to be present for a prayer to be said in the temple<sup>ix</sup>. As seen in figures 6<sup>x</sup> and 7<sup>xi</sup>, the surrounding region is verdant, and well-kept. The Air Force General Hospital is located close to it. Although the structure has been repaired, it still need maintenance and upkeep to be in optimal working order.



Figure 6: The surrounding area around Moses Eldiri

**2.5 Architectural Description of the Building:**

The structure is rectangular in design and has an iron fence all around it. The entrance, which faces Sabil Al-Khazindar Street in Abbasiya, is situated in half of the western facade. The Ten Commandments are written in Hebrew and encircle an open book, with a sizable six-pointed star and other ornaments at the top. The first and final letters of the Hebrew name David are represented by the star. They think that the birth of the Prophet David is symbolized by the six-pointed star in Figure 8<sup>xii</sup>.



Figure 8: The six-pointed star from the inside of the temple



The facades are extremely basic. This austerity is a reflection of the ascetic mentality that defined the Egyptian Karaite Jewish personality—also known as the Melancholy of Zion—who forwent many of life's pleasures and were cloistered in their beliefs, with only business dealings serving as their conduit to the outer world. The synagogue entrance depicted in figure 8 demonstrates how the forms of the temple openings are not very varied, reflecting the ethos of simplicity and humility that is characteristic of this religion.

The temple's interior is square in shape, and above it is a massive dome that is supported by four columns in the temple courtyard. Three porticoes encircle the courtyard on all three sides, with the exception of the eastern side. There is a marble staircase that leads up several steps to the location of the marble building. The Qari temple's hikal is its apex and the most prominent architectural feature. The word used in the structure is Arabic from Hebrew. It holds the wooden cabinet supporting the framework, which is embellished with units of ornamentation, the most significant of which is shaped like a palm tree. Four windows with pointed arches capped by a spherical frame of coloured glass adorn the top of the hikal. There's a big chandelier and a cluster of metal lights hanging from the ceiling to provide lighting. suspended from the dome's ceiling. There's a little room to the right of the temple with an iron safe that holds significant<sup>xiii</sup>.

The Qara'i sect's Board of Directors' headquarters is housed in an annexe to the temple where Hebrew texts are preserved. The structure was named Dar al-Shar'a of the Qara'i (Alhakhamkhana), which is a Turkish term that means "the rabbi's office" and is composed of the words "hakham" and "khanah.". The rabbi would host high-ranking foreign delegations. He oversees the sect's operations. Adjacent to the structure is a Hebrew library with around 5,000 books that was established in AD 1994. It is regarded as Cairo's second library, following the Jewish Heritage Library, which is housed in the Temple (Shaar Hashamayim) building on Adly Street. The synagogue's layout is simple to commit to memory when you observe in figure 9<sup>xiv</sup>.

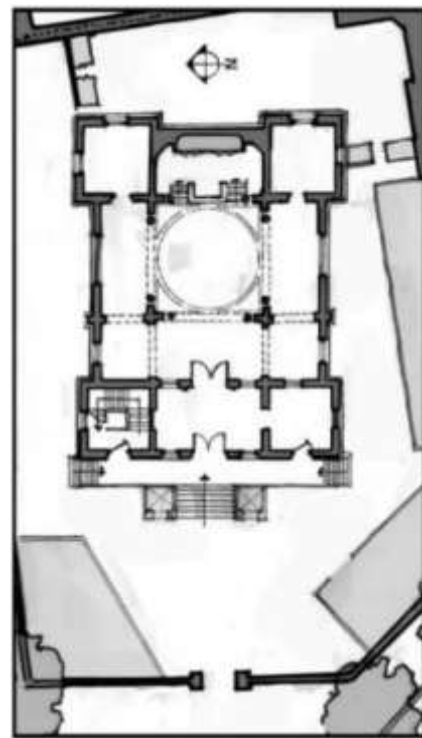


Figure 9: Plan of the synagogue

### Similar case study:

**Typology of case study: religious building (Jewish).**

### 3. Ben Ezra Synagogue

#### 3.1 Historic background:

The temple was built in the 12th century AD, and was rebuilt in the 19th century, according to a statement issued by the Egyptian Council of Ministers. The temple was named after Ben Ezra, in reference to Ezra the Scribe, one of the Jewish rabbis. Ben Ezra Synagogue is considered the oldest Jewish synagogue in Egypt, and the temple is located inside the Babylon Fortress. This temple was the center of many ceremonies, gatherings and prayers, but it is no longer in use today<sup>xv</sup>.

Some believe that it was once a Coptic Orthodox church that was sold to members of the Jewish community in Egypt in 882. There are still stories that are far from history and a story that has not been recorded by historians and has been told from generation to generation, from father to son, that the Coptic Pope refused to sell the church, so the Jews told him: We were sold the right to use it for a period of one hundred years. The Patriarch agreed, so they wrote a document between them,



summarizing it: The Jews have a right to use this church for a period of one hundred years, and they must return it to the Copts after that, and its use begins from 'this day'. Among the Jews wickedness is that they did not write a date on this document, and of course hundreds of years have passed, and every hundred years end, and the Copts want their church. The Jews say to them, "From this day" Because today is not specified with a date<sup>xvi</sup>.

The main features of the temple are still in place. The bima, or pulpit, where prayers are read, stands in the middle of the temple. As for the temple, which represents the direction of prayer and the holiest element in the Jewish temple, it appears decorated in the arabesque style and inlaid with mother-of-pearl in a fusion of different artistic traditions. As for the Ten Commandments, they are written on Temple in Hebrew. Each temple maintains a special storehouse of documents known as the Geniza, where unwanted documents containing the name of the Lord are stored. Ben Ezra had a large Geniza that included many documents accumulated over 850 years. This treasure trove of historical documents was discovered in 1888 AD.

The temple was used throughout history by the majority of Jewish sects in Egypt. It was used by the Iraqi Jews, namely the Karaite Jews, the Levantine Jews, the Ashkenazim, and the Sephardim.

It ended up as a temple for the rabbinic Jews after the Karaite Jewish sect moved to Cairo in the Fatimid era, and they were the ones who spoke Arabic as their original language.

The temple simple façade in figure 10<sup>xvii</sup> consists of two floors like other Jewish temples. The first floor is allocated to men and the second to women. In the middle there is a preaching platform where the Torah is read, you can see it in figure 11<sup>xviii</sup>, and in the east there is on a high platform the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the Torah scrolls. It is obscured by a carved door and a curtain from the inside.

The decorative forms of this temple reflect the art that we find in Egypt with its multiple influences, whether from the ancient, Byzantine or Islamic eras<sup>xix</sup>.



Figure 10: Facade of Ben Ezra temple



Figure 11: A copy of the "Torah scrolls"

### 3.2 Architectural description

The layout of the temple is rectangular in shape, with an area of about 3,500 square meters. It has front facade devoid of decorations, while the interior was designed in the basilica style, as it is divided by two pavilions into three parallel galleries, the middle of which is the most spacious in figure 12<sup>xx</sup>, and in the middle galleries there are two platforms. The first is known as the Atlas of the Miracle, while the second It is the prayer platform (bima) shown in figure 13<sup>xxi</sup>, and on the second floor there is a ladies' prayer balcony, occupying three sides. At both ends there are two rooms for belongings and the geniza, and behind the temple there is a well for purification with which ablution is performed before entering the temple, especially washing the feet<sup>xxii</sup>.



Figure 12: The Ark and "Menorah"



Figure 14: After restoration



Figure 13: The "Bimah"

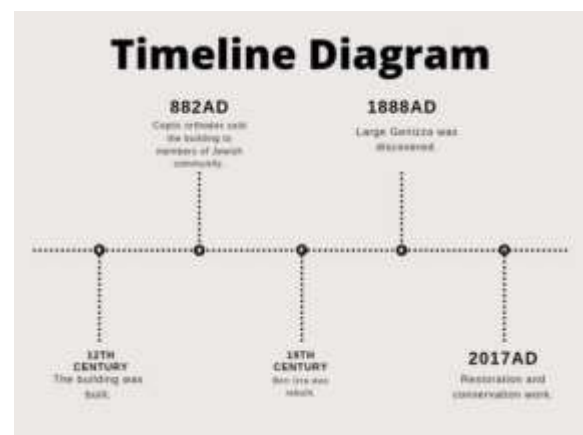


Figure 15: A timeline diagram that concludes what happened in Ben Ezra synagogue till now

By authors

### 3.3 Restoration and Conservation works:

The building was ordered torn down around 1012 CE, but rebuilt a few decades later. Over the centuries, the synagogue suffered a number of fires and was restored several times. Its latest restoration was completed by the Drop of Milk Association, an organization that seeks to preserve Egypt's Jewish heritage — required treatment to protect ceilings, stones and provide insulation<sup>xxiii</sup>.

Bertini said ARCE works closely with the ministry to protect conservation efforts. It awarded Drops of Milk a grant in 2017 to fund their restoration efforts of the remaining synagogues in Egypt, including Ben Ezra. The renovation was to preserve Egyptian Jewish heritage. The synagogue's ceiling was reinforced to prevent collapse, the library was heavily restored, and the building was further cleaned and insulated. Given the small population of Egyptian Jews, the renovation was largely done to improve tourism to the synagogue, we can see some restoration processes in figure 14<sup>xxiv</sup>.

### 4. Result :

The rehabilitation of the Moses El-Diri Jewish Synagogue in Abbasiya, Cairo, has successfully contributed to the preservation of Egypt's rich cultural heritage, especially reflecting the historical legacy of its Jewish community. By restoring the synagogue, Egypt has not only revived a significant religious site but also strengthened its commitment to honoring the diverse cultural contributions that have shaped the nation's history. The revitalization of the synagogue serves as a key element in promoting Egypt's pluralistic past, providing locals and international visitors with an opportunity to engage with and appreciate this aspect of Egypt's cultural mosaic. The project has also provided a boost to the country's tourism sector, as the restored synagogue attracts cultural enthusiasts and history tourists, expanding Cairo's array of heritage-based attractions.

### 5. Suggested Plans:

The proposed strategies for restoring and revitalizing the synagogue begin with a comprehensive assessment of its current condition.



This initial step ensures that any restoration efforts are well-informed and tailored to preserve the historical essence of the building while maintaining its structural integrity. Restoration should prioritize returning the synagogue to its original architectural design, highlighting key historical elements to maintain its authenticity. Creating cultural exhibits is an essential part of the plan. These exhibits would showcase the synagogue’s significant role within the Jewish community in Egypt, offering a rich narrative through artifacts, photographs, and historical documents. Such displays would educate visitors on the synagogue’s past and deepen their appreciation for its cultural importance. Educational programs are integral for engaging visitors of all ages. These programs could include guided tours, workshops, and lectures that delve into Jewish history, traditions, and cultural practices. Collaborating with local historians, scholars, and members of the community would ensure these programs are accurate and enriching. Interactive experiences would further enhance visitor engagement. Multimedia presentations, virtual reality tours, and storytelling sessions can be incorporated to make the history of the synagogue come alive in an immersive way. This approach fosters a deeper connection between visitors and the historical narrative. Community engagement is a cornerstone of the project. Partnering with local organizations, schools, and community groups would promote a broader cultural understanding and encourage active participation. Special events, festivals, and outreach programs would help integrate the synagogue into the community and garner support for its preservation. Visitor amenities are also essential to creating a welcoming experience. A visitor center, gift shop, cafe, and restrooms would enhance comfort and encourage longer stays. Such facilities make the synagogue not just a historical site but a vibrant destination. To attract both domestic and international tourists, a robust marketing strategy is necessary. Using social media, travel websites, and cultural publications would help raise awareness and position the synagogue as a must-visit location. Sustainability must be woven into the restoration and ongoing operations. Energy-efficient lighting, water conservation practices, and waste management initiatives can minimize the environmental impact and ensure the project’s long-term viability. Incorporating renewable energy sources such as

solar panels would further support this goal. Collaboration with government agencies and NGOs is vital for securing funding, permits, and necessary regulatory approvals. These partnerships can also provide expertise and resources that expedite the restoration process. The restoration project should culminate in a grand opening ceremony to celebrate its completion.

This event would serve as a milestone, recognizing the efforts to preserve Jewish heritage in Egypt shown in figure 16



*Figure 16, frame work for suggested plans, by Authors*

Inviting dignitaries, community leaders, and stakeholders would lend significance to the occasion. Turning the synagogue into a green building involves several practical measures. Upgrades to insulation, windows, and lighting





can enhance energy efficiency, while water conservation measures such as low-flow fixtures and rainwater harvesting would reduce water usage. Selecting environmentally friendly building materials, preferably locally sourced or recycled, would support sustainability efforts. A comprehensive waste management plan should be implemented to minimize waste during construction and operation. Indoor air quality can be maintained by using non-toxic materials and ensuring proper ventilation. The addition of indoor plants could contribute to air purification. Passive design strategies, including the building's orientation and natural ventilation, would reduce reliance on mechanical heating and cooling. Green roofs and urban greenery could be integrated into the design to improve insulation and support local wildlife. Providing sustainable transportation options such as bike racks and electric vehicle charging stations would further promote eco-friendly practices. Educational initiatives could inform visitors about the synagogue's green features and the importance of environmental conservation. Workshops and informational programs would inspire visitors to adopt sustainable practices in their own lives. Ensuring modern comfort within the building is important. Accessibility features like ramps, elevators, and wide doorways should be installed to make the synagogue inclusive for all visitors. Comfortable seating and rest areas, along with natural light and ventilation, would create a pleasant environment. Integrating technology through touchscreens and interactive displays would enhance the visitor experience. Safety and security should not be overlooked. Surveillance cameras, emergency exits, and trained staff are necessary to ensure visitor safety. A feedback mechanism for visitors to share their experiences and suggestions would allow for continuous improvement of the site as in figure 17.



*Figure 17, frame work for suggested plans, by Authors*

Preventive conservation is key to the long-term preservation of the synagogue. Climate control systems should be installed to maintain consistent temperature and humidity levels, protecting delicate artifacts from damage. Managing light exposure, using UV-filtering lights, and limiting natural sunlight can prevent fading and deterioration. Regular pest control, cleaning, and pollution management would further safeguard the building and its contents. Guidelines for handling artifacts should be established to minimize damage from human contact, and security systems should be in place to deter theft and vandalism. Routine inspections would help identify any structural issues early, allowing for prompt repairs. Proper storage



facilities using archival-quality materials would protect artifacts not on display. Conservation surveys and emergency preparedness plans should be developed to identify areas of risk and outline responses to potential disasters. Training staff and volunteers in conservation practices would ensure these measures are implemented effectively. Public awareness programs can engage the community, fostering a collective sense of responsibility for preserving this cultural treasure as in figures 18 and 19.



Figure 18, frame work for suggested plans, by Authors



Figure 19, frame work for suggested plans, by Authors

## 6. Discussion:



The rehabilitation of the Moses El-Diri Synagogue offers a profound opportunity for Egypt to promote intercultural dialogue and religious tolerance. Through this restoration, Egypt not only preserves an important historical landmark but also sends a powerful message of inclusivity and respect for its diverse communities. The synagogue's reopening provides a platform for visitors to experience immersive cultural tours, enriching the tourism landscape and offering educational experiences about Egypt's pluralistic history. Furthermore, the project underscores Egypt's broader commitment to fostering peaceful coexistence among various religious groups, reinforcing social cohesion and mutual respect within its society. Ultimately, the rehabilitation of the synagogue positions Egypt as a global leader in cultural preservation and tourism while demonstrating the value of honoring and celebrating diverse cultural identities.

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