

The Renovation of Beirut's Maghen Abraham Synagogue

David M. Betesh

The long delayed renovation of Maghen Abraham Synagogue in Beirut is underway despite some financial difficulties. The process began in August 2009, by the tearing down of the disintegrating roof (new roof completed: November 2009), clearing the debris, and erecting scaffolds. The idea of the renovation has been on the agenda of the current low-profile Jewish community of approximately 300 people for years, and is now being supported by just about everyone in the Lebanese government (even Hizbollah). Solidere, the civil-engineering company owned by the prominent Hariri family, has taken the lead in beginning this monumental work, but more financial support is needed to assure this project's completion.

The Jewish community, whose religion is one of 18 recognized faiths in Lebanon and whose presence in the country dates back 2,000 years, has dwindled over the years. The synagogue, which was built in 1925 in Wadi Abou Jmil, Beirut's main Jewish neighborhood, sat on the battle lines dividing the city during the 1975-1990 civil war, falling on the Muslim side of the Lebanese capital's infamous green line.

The imposing synagogue was badly damaged by Israeli and Palestinian fighting in 1982 and remained devastated long after the rest of the downtown had been rebuilt. Until the renovation began, the structure was filled with empty bottles, broken glass and shattered bricks from the roof. Wide cracks covered the walls and stairways leading to the second floor. According to community leader Isaac Arazi, "Everything was looted during the war: the benches, win-



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dows, tiles and even the imposing marble altar which stands in the middle." Even after the fighting ended, the remaining Jews from the once 22,000 strong community did not have the money to repair or even maintain the building.

The initial price of this project was approximately \$1.5 million. Some funding had already been received by Isaac Arazi, who raised \$40,000 for the project, and by the family of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who made a combined \$2 million donation to 14 different places of worship all across Lebanon. Many efforts are being made by the Jewish Community Council to raise money from friends overseas. These efforts were facilitated by the creation of the thejewsoflebanonproject.org website, a Facebook page entitled "Beirut Magnen Abraham Synagogue" which has over 2,500 fans and a Twitter page, twitter.com/MaghenAbraham. Despite all this effort, the project remains short on funding and would greatly appreciate donations from community supporters that live overseas.

The following information is from the project's Facebook page: "The plans to renovate the Maghen Abraham Synagogue in central Beirut are already underway. The renovation plans which preserve the architectural integrity of the original design (based on old photographs) have been approved by the Lebanese Jewish Community Council."

Rumors have circulated that the synagogue was going to be made into a museum, but this is not true. The synagogue was and will remain at the heart of the Lebanese Jewish community's religious, social and communal activities.

The renovation should take one year to complete once all the money has been raised. In light of the strict legal regulations with the Lebanese banking sector, the Lebanese Jewish Community Council contacted the Central Bank in December 2008, informing them of the plans to start the fund raising campaign and asked for their help in ensuring the effort is legally compliant. They have

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yet to hear back and will continue to update the online community on progress.

Being a non-profit organization, the council continues to accept donations from a limited number of individuals who are known to the community in order to



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remain legally compliant. Once the Central Bank approves the request, a mechanism to accept donations will be put in place for a broader, global audience.

In the meantime, donations are welcomed at the sole and official bank account of the Lebanese Jewish Community Council: First National Bank (Allenby Branch), 20126004 Allenby Street, Beirut Central District, P.O. Box 110435, Beirut, Lebanon.

Telephone: (01) 977 040

Fax: (01) 973 140

E-mail: Allenby@fnb.com.lb

Swift Code: FINKLBBE

Account Name: Conseil Communal Israélite du Liban

Account Number: 0012-134159-008

“We hope this initiative will ensure that the community will grow again. We want to restore it as it was, with all furniture, rugs and chandeliers of yesteryear,” said Arazi. He revealed that the Jewish cemetery will also be renovated. Other synagogues in Lebanon, such as Saida (south) and Aley (south-east of Beirut), which is the oldest synagogue (1870), should also be rehabilitated, but after the work of Maghen Abraham.

“Your support for the Maghen Abraham Synagogue is not merely a financial gesture, but rather a reaffirmation of your belief in Lebanon’s rich tradition of cultural pluralism and religious diversity, a nation of minorities, a nation of multiplicity, in the universal principle of coexistence.”□