

**Division for the Study of Damascus Jewry, Its Legacy and History**

The Kehillot Yisrael Center is dedicated to studying and researching the Jewish legacy and Jewish creativity in their communal context and, in so doing, to cast light on the history of Jewish communities, the individuals and families who lived and took part in them, the connections forged among the communities, and the contribution made by each to the spiritual and cultural tapestry of the Jewish people in the Diaspora. The Institute acts out of a sense of mission, because revealing the communal cultural heritage and making it accessible to the public will stimulate its revival, making this an activity of great value and meaning for a better future.

In this framework, Kehillot Yisrael is establishing research divisions, community by community, to discover, document, and study the hidden records of the Jewish people’s many important communities.

These divisions will be located at Kehillot Yisrael’s permanent home in Jerusalem, in one of the city’s historic monuments, the main building of the Schneller compound.

**The Damascus Community**

Many Jewish sages xxxx had strong connections with the Damascus Jewish community, including native Syrian Jews, passing visitors, and those who settled there from abroad. We will note only a few of their many names here: the most prominent students of the Ari, such as Rabbi Hayyim Vital and his son Rabbi Samuel Vital [MS photo], Rabbi Hiyya Rofe, Rabbi Hayyim Alshekh, Rabbi Elisha Gallico [photo from Benayahu MS], Rabbi Samuel Aripol [MS from *edition princeps* from the Benayahu Collection], Rabbi Yehuda Mishan, Rabbi Yisrael Najara and his father Rabbi Moshe Najara, Rabbi Josiah Pinto, Rabbi Yom Tov Tzahalon, Rabbi Joseph ibn Tsiaḥ, and other Jewish sages and luminaries. In later generations as well, important sages continued to be based in Damascus, among them Rabbi Moshe Galante (known as “the Magen [‘shield’] of Damascus”), Rabbi Mordechai Galante, Rabbi Jacob Antebi, the rabbis of the Masalton–Trab family, and the generations of sages from the Mishan family. This city was celebrated for its residents’ outstanding dedication to extending hospitality to guests and for the large amounts of money distributed by its wealthy residents, such as the well-known Farhi family, Rabbi Netanel Lisboa, and Rabbi Samuel Angel, who devotedly strove to establish yeshivot and study centers and to attract students from near and far. These students include Rabbi Hayyim Amram and his son Rabbi Nathan Amram, Rabbi Isaac Abulafia (author of *Penei Yitzḥak*), Rabbi Solomon Eliezer Alfandari (known as the *Sabba Kedosha*, the “Holy Grandfather”), and many others. These community leaders also acquired thousands of books and manuscripts for the benefit of those studying in the yeshivot, creating fertile ground for the development of Torah literature and, at the same time, contributing to the preservation of valuable literary works.

Regrettably, many works by those sages and a wide variety of other materials can be found only in fragments, scattered in libraries and collections, and much of that literature is entirely undocumented. Sadly, much of what is extant has been miscatalogued, so that important chapters in the history of that illustrious Jewish community, its status, and its influence on the history of our people, languish in obscurity. As part of the division’s activities, the Institute has documented many dozens of manuscripts from the Damascus community, including documents, historical records, and manuscripts dealing with every branch of Torah learning, secular and liturgical poetry, and song. Much of this material has yet to be studied, remains uncatalogued, and has never been published.

The Institute has built strong connections with private collectors who are the custodians of a great deal of this additional material, which shines a spotlight on the history, literary creativity, and legacy of the Damascus community. Some of those manuscripts are in fragile physical condition, and it is imperative that they be documented and preserved before they crumble into dust.

The Institute, its various departments and units, is working unceasingly to sort the materials and track down manuscripts and trace their histories, in order to gather these scattered fragments, piece together larger works, and publish them.

**The Department of Digitization and Documentation of Manuscripts, Documents, and Historical Records**

In order to document the staggeringly large amount of archival material, manuscripts, and other documents, the Institute has set up a state-of-the-art digitization studio, which has been toiling around-the-clock for five years to create professional, high-quality images of manuscripts and historical records and documents. To date, the Institute has photographed more than 1,800,000 pages, and collaborates with scholarly institutions and leading archives around the world. The digitization center follows the international standards of digital preservation in order to preserve our legacy and to make it readily available to scholars and others in pursuit of knowledge. The Institute catalogs and documents the materials by topic and indexes them by topic, community, and individuals mentioned, in order to make these resources as useful and accessible as possible to the public, at no cost on the Internet. This vast digital collection provides a broad foundation for the study of Jewish history and cultural and spiritual creativity, and primary sources from the collection have been utilized in numerous books published by the Institute and by other organizations.

**Department of Research and Publishing House**

The Institute prepares and publishes scientific editions of works in every aspect of Torah learning, with introductions and notes, along with scholarly studies on the history of Jewish communities and aspects of Jewish history. The Institute has a proven publishing track record, and has already published over 700 books, most of them annotated critical editions of important manuscripts that had not yet seen the light of day. Each of those books includes introductions, the fruit of intense scholarly research that shed light on the book, its author, its publishing history, its place in the history of Jewish literature, et cetera. The books have been transcribed and edited by the top experts in Jewish codicology and early printed books, and studied by leading scholars. The Institute brings together the efforts of rabbis and Torah scholars of all stripes with scholars from the academic world, in an effort to achieve the most exacting scholarly insights, to enrich the study of Jewish history, and to redeem our people’s spiritual and cultural treasures from obscurity and neglect.

**The Writings of the Sages of Damascus**

Among the materials we have documented, we will note here a few that we intend to further study and prepare for publication:

* **Kabbalah and Halakha** – The Institute in now at work on a large project of assembling the collected writings of Rabbi Joseph ibn Tsiaḥ, including his responsa, kabbalistic writings, and prayer book, with the intention of publishing them in a synoptic edition, with additional publications possible. [photo from MS of Even Ha-shoham from Benayahu collection] Rabbi Joseph ibn Tsiaḥ was one of Eretz Yisrael’s leading authorities in halakhah, kabbalah, and Jewish thought. He lived and worked in Jerusalem and Damascus during the time of Rabbi Joseph Caro, author of the *Bet Yosef*, and Rabbi Moses ben Joseph of Trani (the “Mabit”), and there is evidence that he, like them, was a student of Rabbi Jacob Berab. The precise details of his biography are obscure, but it is known that he was appointed head of the rabbinic court (*av bet din*) of the Must‘arabim community (of culturally Arabicized Jews) in Damascus and authored numerous responsa. His contemporaries held him in the highest esteem, and debated vociferously with him over points of law. Nonetheless, recognizing the profundity of Rabbi Moses’ thought and his great wisdom, when the Damascus community approached the “Mabit” to hear his opinion on a certain matter, he responded to them, “Praise be to God that you have among you wise men of vast knowledge who know legal matters more profound than these, and in particular the model sage, the judge Rabbi Joseph Tsiaḥ, so you need not have asked me my opinion.” The good rabbi’s name came to be forgotten in later generations, even though we possess some of his writings in manuscript, including his never-before published collection of response,extant in one lone manuscript. Of his kabbalistic work *Even Ha-shoham* several copies remain, the most important of which is in a private collection; the collector has generously entrusted a photocopy of it to the Institute for the purpose of publication. We are also endeavoring to publish his commentary to the prayer book, also of great importance.
* **Prayer Books of the Damascus Rite and Prayer Books Written There**

The ancient liturgical rite of the Jews of Damascus is that of the Must‘arabim, which was in use in Eretz Yisrael, Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, and Iran, the communities known collectively as “a[l]-Sham.” This rite preserves a plethora of customs from the older Eretz-Yisrael rite. After the Sepharadi rite was widely disseminated as Iberian Jews arrived in the eastern Mediterranean following their expulsion from Spain, the older Eretz-Yisrael rite fell into disuse and the Sepharadi rite was accepted across the region. Nevertheless, some fragments of the older rite remained, as did some earlier customs that eventually vanished over the generations. A thorough study of this material was carried about by Rabbi Hadid, who published *siddurim* and *mahzorim* (prayerbooks) that collected and noted the customs of those communities in recent generations. There is still much to do, though, in locating old, neglected materials documenting the unused rite in manuscripts and fragments of early works. A reappraisal of known manuscripts that have been miscatalogued might illuminate the uniqueness and originality of the rite and contribute to the ability of the descendants of Damascus Jews in the coming generations to become familiar with it, along with contributing to the study of Jewish liturgy and customs.

The siddur of מהרש"ו has been printed, another part will be printed soon…. Photo from the MS

**The Department for the Study of the Customs of Jewish Communities**

“Jewish custom is Torah,” wrote the medieval Tosafists, and indeed the importance and status of *minhag* (custom) became sanctified and of great legal weight, to the point that rabbinic authorities (*posekim*) stated, “*Minhag* overrules *halakhah*.” In early times, Jewish sages took care to write down the customs of their communities to document them, and make copies to be distributed so that the customs not be forgotten. On the other hand, during the long years of exile and dispersion, many customs were adopted by the unlearned from surrounding non-Jewish communities; as Rabbenu Tam quipped, “The letters of *minhag* are the same as those of *Gehinom* [hell].” Many of the beloved customs that had been practiced in various communities came to be forgotten or distorted, to the point that their original intent and rationale were obscured. Those customs can be seen as a decoration for the *mitzvot*, and filled the life of Jewish society in exile with cultural richness and fraternal love; in a sense, such customs are the secret of the community’s existence and continuity in unity and faith, in a way of life passed down from earlier times. Due to the long timespan and the waves of history that buffeted the communities, records of those customs exist only in ancient manuscripts that can only be explained and interpreted by expert scholars. Those customs deserve to be published and flourished anew, which would no doubt bring great blessing to the community and strengthen connections among its members.

The Kehillot Yisrael Institute has been fortunate to be able to locate and publish many works that preserve local community traditions, customs, and regulations; a great deal of material remains to published, God willing. The Institute’s plans include further investigating and studying the ancient customs of the Damascus community, some of which were founded there but served as an inspiration to other Jewish communities in earlier generations.

* **Organizations and Holy Societies**

*Hevrot Kodesh* (“holy societies”) formed the foundation of every Jewish community, each in its own particular way and according to its own character. In our documentation and research, we have identified and gathered thousands of such voluntary groups, including some founded to spread Torah learning, others established to strengthen worship, and those, the majority, that came together for charitable purposes, to provide assistance to the living and to honor the dead.

Naturally, their methods, styles, and modes of operation differed among the various communities. The organizing approach of Jews in one country differed from that in another. This fact adds flavor and spice to the study of these organizations and the effort to understand the reasons for their establishment and how they operated; after all, each resembled the others only in its core. A full description of these societies, their by-laws and regulations, is not only a scholarly desideratum. Making such materials available to the public might spark the creation once again of such organizations, to the betterment of Jewish life.

The Damascus Jewish community, too, can boast of such organizations that were active in the many realms of daily life: help and healing, study and prayer, and other sacred endeavors. The vital record of these groups, however, are only preserved on scraps of paper and in books that were consigned to storage long ago. Their publication would be of incalculable aid in reviving the groups’ purposes and recreating similar societies in our communities today.

**The Department for the Study of Poetry and Liturgical Music**

Jewish poetry and music have enjoyed a revival of interest in recent years. In every sector and age group, there is tremendous interest in Jewish musical traditions and in poetry and song. In the context of the work of the Department of Digitization, we have photographed and documented hundreds of manuscripts of poetry and *piyyut* (liturgical poetry) from various Jewish communities. These manuscripts preserve thousands of songs and poems composed for religious ceremonies, lifecycle events, communal and social activities, and more. Even a cursory examination of this literature reveals unparalleled cultural riches and a bountiful and varied musical tradition.

It is the Institute’s intention to undertake a comprehensive study of the poetry, both secular and liturgical, and musical traditions of various Jewish communities. We are now laying the groundwork to produce and release musical albums, organized by community and by topic, each of which will include a research-based study of the particular musical tradition and the types of compositions and their uses, along with beautiful photographs of manuscripts and older printed editions of works of poetry. The Institute will collaborate with other leading institutions doing similar work, such as the National Library of Israel’s website for Jewish liturgical poetry and song.

**The Department for the Study and Documentation of Cemeteries**

Much historical information is recorded in gravestones. There is no historian or genealogist who does not make use of information written on the gravestones of the deceased, which contain important details and hints of the individual’s history, activity, accomplishments, and status, and the date of his or her death. The gravestone is in every sense a historical document, and sometimes historical, biographical, and genealogical information of real historical value can be gleaned from it.

Despite this fact, most Jewish cemeteries around the world have yet to be documented or studied in the historiographical literature or in various databases. Sadly, recent years have witnessed the destruction of ancient Jewish cemeteries in the Diaspora. They fall prey to the unscrupulous appetite for development of governments or powerful economic interests, and are also sometimes targeted by antisemitic desecration. Such incidents have become, it hurts to say, daily occurrences.

The Center has taken upon itself the mission of photographing and documenting the remaining Jewish cemeteries in the Diaspora (including those in Muslim countries such as Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Egypt). This assignment, which is pressing, difficult, and complex, requires navigating closed-off and neglected cemeteries, dealing with overgrown plants, pests, and inhospitable weather to find a proper camera angle, and all the other problems that arise in fieldwork.

To date, thousands of graves have been photographed as part of this important project. The Institute has even published a lavish sample volume telling the story of the Jewish cemetery of Marrakesh, Morocco. This wide-ranging and detailed book comprises not only the history of the site and a list of the prominent people buried there, but their biographies and descriptions of their works. Photographs of manuscripts copies of the writings of the deceased are placed side-by-side with pictures of the gravestones, as well as records and historical documents in which the individuals are mentioned, and essays detailing their accomplishments, the customs of the cemeteries, and information about the *hevrot kodesh* that saw to their burial. The book also includes a detailed map of the cemetery and the hundreds of gravestones there. The Center intends to publish printed and digital editions of such books about Jewish cemeteries around the globe.

* **The Damascus Cemetery**

Planned activities: documenting gravestones, mapping the cemetery, compiling a list of the rabbis and prominent individuals buried there, and demarcating their burial places. We will also prepare a book-length volume, in digital and print editions, that lays out the story of the cemetery, the history of the sages buried there, transcriptions of tombstone inscriptions, and photographs of the gravestones themselves.

*The above constitutes just a sample of our many spheres of activity. Our ancestors bequeathed to us a glorious legacy and vast sources of inspiration—to aid us as individuals and as a community. That legacy extends beyond a specific time and place, and draws on the essence of integrity, wisdom, and morality bestowed on the Jewish people. Its importance for shaping the future is far greater than its importance for knowing the past.*

*The totality of the activities and materials created and curated by the Institute are not intended to lie fallow in the repositories of wisdom, but are intended to be made available to the public using the most advanced and accessible tools, both technical (e.g., websites and a comprehensive databases) and experiential (a visitors center, workshops, guiding), in order to assist the public in discovering, understanding, and delving deeper into these topics that are so important, essential, and dear to its heart.*