

Platform of Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform / Those who are backing our cultural heritage Vanguards of Our Cultural Heritage/ Part 11

"Izmir Jewish Cultural Heritage" with Nesim Bencoyo

TOPICS: Historical and Social Structure of Izmir Jewish Community, Jewish Synagogues in the Kemeraltı Region of Izmir, History and Functions of Synagogues, Restoration and Protection of Synagogues, Vision Developed with Izmir's Jewish Community, Efforts to Create a Jewish Cultural Heritage Visitor Point, Architectural and Historical Features of Synagogues, Future of Izmir Jewish Cultural Heritage Projects

Nükhet Everi- Today we are going to Izmir in our interviews with those who shoulder our cultural heritage Vanguards of Our Cultural Heritage interview series. We are together with Nesim Bencoya. Firstly, I would like to ask him to introduce himself and then to the project he has undertaken from its history to today until today.

Nesim Bencoya- First of all Firstly, thank you for this opportunity. If I introduce myself a little bit briefly, there are many projects related to Jewish cultural heritage in Izmir and I am the coordinator of these projects. I am not an architect; I studied sociology and anthropology. I have also been involved in cinema for thirty years. I worked as the programme director of the Antalya Film Festival, the artistic director of the Malatya Film Festival and the director of the Izmir Cyprus Film Festival. I am currently the director of a company called Hezarfen Film Gallery. Ten years ago, I revisited the synagogues that my father had taken me to as a child, and an my enthusiasm grew in me.

Izmir's Jewish population has always been around 10 %per cent of the general population. Before the proclamation of the Republic of Türkiye, the Jewish community was governed by a religious regime and synagogues served both as places of worship and cultural centres. For this reason, many synagogues were established. However, some of them disappeared over time. The history of the Jewish community in Izmir dates back to the 17th century. During the Ottoman period, Izmir was an important commercial centre and this contributed to the development of the Jewish community. In the 19th century, there were about 30 synagogues in Izmir.

I have been in this business for ten years. When I came to Izmir in 2017 for Yorgo Dalaras' concert, I observed the condition of the synagogues in the Kemeraltı area. Most of the synagogues are battereddamaged and new buildings have been built around them. However, we continue our efforts to save the synagogues. We are working in historical areas such as Havra Street and these areas are very important for Jewish culture. For example, Etz Hayim Synagogue was built in the 14th century and is one of the oldest synagogues in Izmir. We started restoration work in 2018 and completed it in 2020. We faced many difficulties in this process, but we realised succeeded in the realisation of this project with the support of the Jewish community and local people.

Our first step was the Etmayim Synagogue. The ceiling of this synagogue had collapsed 20 years ago and had various problems. During the restoration process, we strengthened the synagogue with modern architectural techniques while preserving the historical texture. We faced many difficulties in this process, but with the support of the Jewish community and local people, we implemented this project. After the restoration was completed, the synagogue was opened for worship and cultural activities. This raised the morale of the Jewish community and was an important step towards the preservation of cultural heritage.

Synagogues are not only places of worship, but are also centres of social and cultural activities. Considering the social and cultural needs of the Jewish community, thesetheir roles ofas synagogues

become even more important. For example, Beth Israel Synagogue is one of the largest synagogues in Izmir and the events organised here bring the community together. This multifaceted function of synagogues strengthens the social ties of the community and contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage.

Havra Street is the centre of Izmir's Jewish cultural heritage. In this area, in addition to synagogues, there are Jewish tradesmen's shops and historical buildings. We are working to revitalise Havra Street and bring it into attract tourism. In this context, we are developing projects for the restoration of the historical buildings on the street and the promotion of the region. Thus, we aim to both protect the Jewish cultural heritage and increase the Izmir's tourism potential of Izmir.

The main objective of the Izmir Jewish Cultural Heritage Project (*İzmir Yahudi Kültür Mirası Projesi*) is to protect and promote the Jewish cultural heritage in Izmir. In this context, we are carrying out various activities such as the restoration of synagogues, organising events on about Jewish culture, and creating educational programmes. Another important aim of the project is to strengthen the social and cultural ties of the Jewish community. To this end, we bring the community together through events and festivals organised in synagogues. Through the project, we aim to pass on Jewish cultural heritage to future generations and to keep this heritage alive.

Nükhet Everi: A festival has also been organised in recent years. I would like you to Please tell us about it as well,

Nesim Bencoya: Through the Izmir Sephardic Culture Festival (*İzmir Sefarad Kültür Festivali*), we promote Jewish culture and try to increase the interest of the local administration and the public in this culture. Thanks to these festivals, awareness of Jewish culture increases and support is provided for restoration projects. Within the scope of the festival, we organise concerts, exhibitions and conferences in synagogues. Thus, we ensure that both the Jewish community and the people of Izmir recognise this cultural heritage. In 2019, the first year of the festival, there was a great participation and this made us very happy. Cultural and religious events that take place in synagogues to ensure the participation of not only the Jewish community but also the people of Izmir. Through these events, dialogue and interaction between different cultures is possible. Promoting Jewish cultural heritage is also an important step in the fight against antisemitism. Social dialogue and cultural interaction contribute to increasing tolerance in society and to seeing cultural diversity as a richness. The Izmir Jewish Cultural Heritage Project is of great importance in this respect.

Nükhet Everi: What are your future projects? Let's us end our conversation with these.

Nesim Bencoya: Our future projects include the restoration of more synagogues and the protection of Jewish cultural heritage. By progressing these projects step by step, we aim to pass on Izmir's Jewish culture and heritage to future generations. Within the scope of restoration projects, we renovate synagogues with modern techniques while preserving the historical texture. We also organise educational programmes and events on Jewish culture, enabling the younger generation to get to know this culture. In our future projects, we plan to further expand our work with international collaborations and funds.