

journeys. a history of the Jewish people

Museum of Jewish History

Exhibition

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PATRONAT CALL DE GIRONA
THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL
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Ajuntament de Girona
Diputació de Girona
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This is an exhibition on a journey of thirty-eight centuries through various roads: it run through almost every corner of the world, and it span from 1730 BCE to the present day. This is the story of an entire people, told through a thousand routes that are physical and social, political and conceptual. This is the chronicle of the paths that the Jewish People have been building over time, overcoming adversities, and rewriting themselves from shared experiences and a common, fundamental, defining and identifying memory.

The roads are new, shoes,
Bought only yesterday, but the way
It is old and passes into inheritance.
Yehuda Amichai

1 _Jewish journeys_



Illustrated Passover Haggadah. Northern Italy, ca. 1450
National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 6130=34

Travelling from one place to another —physically, spiritually, or emotionally— sets people on a path of transition. The odyssey of the Jews began, as stated in the Bible, with the realization that there is but One Infinite Spirit. Around 1730 BCE, this Divine Being told Abram (who had already uprooted himself from his birthplace "Ur of the Chaldeans") to go "to the land that I'll show you" (Genesis 12, 1).

That land was Canaan. Abram became Abraham, and Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all "the Children of Abraham." The Canaan promised to Abraham would become Israel. During another journey, also described in the Bible, Abraham's grandson Jacob was renamed "Israel."

In a time of famine, Jacob journeyed to Egypt. There his descendants were enslaved. And in the 13th century BCE, Moses led their Exodus back toward the Promised Land.

The Bible continues explaining that, at Mount Sinai, God gave them the Torah with its Ten Commandments, rituals, and statutes: Shabbat was to be a day free of labour. Passover was to commemorate the Exodus. A roadmap for living mandated charity, hospitality, and respect for strangers.



Passover Haggadah. Amsterdam, 1695
National Library of Israel, R 2= 35 V 3398
Contains illustrations by Abraham B. Jacob.
In the image: Abraham receives the three angels (Book of Genesis, 18)

Arrival upon the Land of Israel created many challenges. Could a tribal people come together culturally and politically? Could they sustain their One God idea in the polytheistic Middle East?

Geo-strategic circumstances and their own destructive choices set them on a march to Exile, return, and dispersal again. Then, after 2,000 years, to an improbable, extraordinary, further homecoming.

Along the way, whenever they could, they transformed forlorn Exile into flourishing Diaspora. They reinvigorated Sinai's Commandments.

Their pilgrimages recollected what was lost, but also reaffirmed their aspirations. They composed prayers, both poetic and practical. There were hair-raising escapes but also solace in finding safe harbors.

The Jewish odyssey created openings to redefine who they were, what they would learn and share, and where they were heading.

/2 _exile and diaspora_



Arba Turim, by Jacob ben Asher
National Library of Israel, RI Schoken 59
First Jewish publication in Istanbul (the former Constantinople), which later hosted a thriving Jewish community with numerous renowned printers. The edition is the work of a Jewish printer who came to Istanbul from the Iberian Peninsula after 1492.

The Jewish People has been dispersed and forced to exile from Israel by different conquerors through time.

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Judea, destroyed Solomon's Temple (586 BCE), and exiled the Jews to Babylonia and beyond. Later, on 538 BCE, Cyrus King of Persia allowed Jews to return to Zion to rebuild their Temple. Given a choice, many freely remained where they were, in Babylon, and it became their land. When Jewish communities willingly stay put or spring up outside Israel, that is Diaspora, not Exile.

Diaspora communities blossomed as Babylonian, Persian, Greek-Hellenist, and Roman civilizations swept across the Middle East. Polytheistic societies were (mainly) tolerant of the Jews' monotheism. In Alexandria, Philo championed Judaism to his Greek-Hellenist neighbors; even the Torah was translated into Greek.

Confirmation of a privilege, Alfonso V, King of Aragon. Zaragoza, 1429
National Library of Israel, Ms. Yah. Var. 40.3
A rare document that proclaims an allowance for Jews to settle on a nobleman's land called Berenguer de Bardají a mere 63 years before the Jews were expelled from the Hispanic kingdoms.



In 70 CE, Rome captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Second Temple, and set the stage for an Exile that would last 2,000 years.

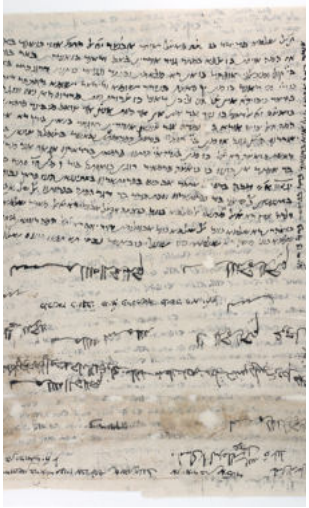
Though rooted in the land, Judaism has been reinventing itself since Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Exile. Collective memory was preserved in the Talmud (completed 500 CE), a cornerstone for Judaism encouraging debate about the Bible, the best course of life, and how to adapt laws and rituals to life outside Israel. Therefore studying the Talmud became integral to the Jewish journey.

The Church's teaching of contempt toward Jews triggered waves of persecutions and expulsions. With Islam's spread since 632, Jewish communities living in conquered lands, while not granted equal rights, had legal protections that Christianity denied them.

Wether Jewish communities lived in Christian territories (inside Jewish quarters, *calls* or *ghettos*) or under Islamic influence (inside *millets*), life was structured around the community axis, and everything was centralized around the family, the synagogue, the study house and the ritual bath.

Exile nurtured Judaism's diverse mosaic —Sephardi, Ashkenazi, Persian, and Yemenite— reflected in liturgy, dress, food, and language. While preserving Hebrew for religious purposes, Judaism was enriched by its encounter with other civilizations leading to the development of such Jewish languages as Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic.

The Jews' enforced Exile ended in 1948 with Israel's establishment and haven guaranteed. Fortunately, nowadays, many Diaspora communities are also thriving.



Letter to Siman Tov ben Yehuda ben Daniel in Bamiyan, Persia. 11-12 century

National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8333.29=4

This item in early Judeo-Persian was found in the Afghan Genizah, a cache of fragmented Jewish manuscripts found in a cave in Afghanistan in 2011. In it, a Jew is writing to his brother begging him to disbelieve the slanderous rumors that he no longer keeps the Jewish faith, and expresses his deep desire to return to Bamiyan, which is his beloved home.



Pierre Jacques Benoit, *Jodensavanne*, ca. 1830

The *Jodensavanne* ("Jewish Savanna") was an agricultural community in Suriname, South America, established by Jews fleeing persecution in Spain.

/3 _inspirational journeys___



Map of holy places in Israel for Jewish pilgrims. Safed (Israel), 1564
National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°6947

Being on a pilgrimage means leaving behind the familiar in search of spiritual fulfilment, answering a calling, perhaps paying homage at an evocative site. In Judaism, which enshrined three Pilgrimage Festivals —Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot—, that site was the Temple in Jerusalem (Zion), where the ancestral past of the Jewish people, its origin and raison d'être are located.

Entire families often made the pilgrimages to the Temple, even from the Diaspora. During the Second Temple era, the Babylonian Diaspora sent massive pilgrimage delegations to Jerusalem.

To lament the loss of the biblical Zion, during the Middle Ages pilgrims visited the Temple Mount, Western Wall, Cave of the Patriarchs and Rachel's Tomb.

At the end of his life, Girona's rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (1267) traveled to Israel, from where he sent emotional and nostalgic letters to his sons and pupils. Renowned pilgrims Judah ha-Levi (1140), Maimonides (1165), and Benjamin ben Jonah of Tudela (1171) left enduring impressions. Moses Montefiore made his last pilgrimage at 91 (1875). Pilgrim travelogues revealed faraway personalities, practices and ideas.

Then there are pilgrimages to the gravesites of holy men and women, a time-honoured tradition in Israel and beyond in the Middle East and North Africa, extending to Europe and North America. Candles are lit, prayers recited, written petitions left.

To pay homage to pre-Holocaust European Jewry, Elie Wiesel journeyed to Sighet. Others went to the Venice Ghetto, Alfred Dreyfus's gravesite in Paris, or to Franz Kafka's Prague tomb, especially on the anniversary of his death.

Connecting the individual to the collective can also form a spiritual experience. After the Iron Curtain fell, many Polish people recovered their hidden Jewish ancestry. From South America to South Asia, lost Jews traced their newfound lineage. For many, discovering their Jewish heritage has been an emotional experience.

Taglit-Birthright, a non-profit program, brings college-age people to encounter Israel.

For some self-discovery might be achievable not by traversing the globe but close to home in quiet contemplation.

The essence of a successful pilgrimage? Perhaps openness to encounters along the way, returning home safe and revitalized.

4

escape to safety



Else Lasker-Schuler, *Die verscheuchte Dichterin,* 1942
National Library of Israel, Arc Ms Var 501 03 56
"The Banished Poet" is a drawing made after experiencing an anti-Semitic attack.

In every generation, and in nearly every country, Jews have had to uproot themselves to survive. A new ruler might upend sanctuary into suffering.

"Change your place, change your luck," goes a Hebrew proverb. Willingness to move in search of spiritual, physical, or economic haven was imperative.

Under the First Crusade (1096), running away was near impossible. During the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisitions (1492-1530), escape was the best decision —over the Pyrenees, to the Ottoman Empire, or New World.

Havens were seldom permanent. When Portugal dislodged the Dutch from Brazil (1654), even the New World did not guarantee shelter from the Inquisition. So Spanish-Portuguese Jews landed in New Amsterdam (New York) and later Jamaica, Barbados, and the West Indies.

Mostly, Jews took fate into their own hands. Evading Czarist pogroms or conscription, they headed for England and America (1880s-1914). The quest for haven brought Jews to Saskatchewan (1902), Argentina (1890), Kenya (1903), Australia (1927), and Birobidjan (1928).

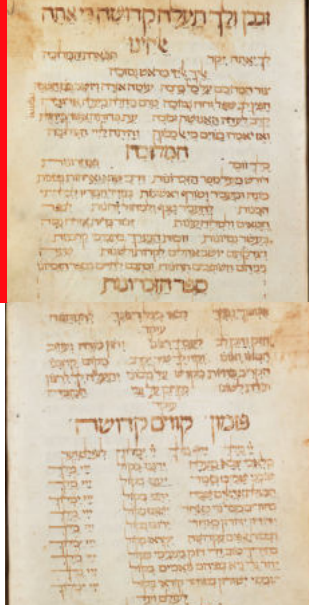
In the years leading up to WWII, Jews were forced to leave many places, and no country was obliged to take them in, but some did: Russia, Shanghai, the Dominican Republic, and others. The Kindertransport lifted 10,000 children to Britain in the nine months before the war. And during the war, poet Abraham Sutzkever bolted the Vilna Ghetto to join the Jewish partisan fighters. Others crossed the French-Spanish border clandestinely, through different parts of the Pyrenees: many, such as Walter Benjamin, tried to flee through Portbou; others, such as Shaya Gertner and his family, through Esponellà. The archives of Girona are full of names and documents that are a reminder of it.

Upright Gentiles tipped the scales for humanity. Consider such beacons of decency as Japanese envoy Chiune Sugihara, Polish nun Cecylia Roszak, British diplomat Frank Foley, and Italian businessman Giorgio Perlasca. Yad Vashem Holocaust centre identified no fewer than 27,362 individuals as "Righteous Among the Nations."

Survivors of the Holocaust needed to be smuggled into Palestine. Only with Israel's birth could Jews come freely. Some had to be rescued: Operations Magic Carpet (Yemen), Ezra and Nehemiah (Iraq) and Moses (Ethiopia). The Iron Curtain fell (1991), and a million more were free to emigrate.

Today, escape is no longer an issue and Europe is welcoming to its 1.4 million Jews.

5 _tradition and travel



Prayer book for Rosh Ha-Shana and Yom Kippur according to the Catalonian Rite. Catalonia, Spain, ca. 1280
National Library of Israel Ms. Heb 8°6527

Judaism is a way of life on the road no less than at home. Kosher food and a Sabbath-friendly place to stay are essential considerations for Jewish travelers. Tefillin worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers, prayer books, psalms, and the Hebrew Bible are familiar travel companions.

For millennia, Jews journeyed for commerce and pilgrimage. Travelers connected far-flung communities whilst bridging between and amongst other civilizations.

Travel could be difficult and perilous. Embarking on a journey —whether by land, sea, or nowadays air—, Jews recite a travel prayer appealing to Divine providence to guide them safely to their destination and back. It is an ancient prayer cited in the Talmud with emendations made over time and according to rite:



Pinchas ben Abraham Halevy of Halberstadt, Jewish calendar. Saxony (Germany), 1716
National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°2380
The book enables one to calculate Jewish dates correctly, using the Christian calendar for reference.

"May it be Thy will, O Lord my God, to lead me forth in peace and direct my steps in peace and uphold me in peace, and deliver me from the hand of every enemy and ambush by the way, and send a blessing on the works of my hands, and cause me to find grace, kindness, and mercy in Thy eyes and in the eyes of all who see me. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who hearkeneth unto prayer."

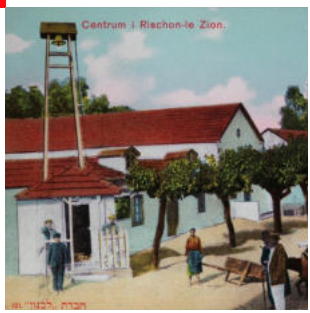
Jewish travelers could reasonably expect hospitality from co-religionists. Study halls might serve as makeshift hostels. A friendly welcome is a biblically grounded virtue recalling Abraham's embrace of the stranger. The dictum "let all who are hungry come and eat" is hallowed in Talmud and enshrined in the Passover Haggadah.

During the Middle Ages, European communities provided meals and lodgings for itinerant Jews. It is commendable to have a table guest —especially on the Sabbath— ideally, one who is religiously erudite, displays business acumen, and enjoys engaging in matrimonial matchmaking.

Finally, when our traveler was safely home, it was time to recite the Benediction of Deliverance in the synagogue before a Torah scroll.

6

the journey continues



Postcard from Rishon le-Tsiyyon. Israel, ca. 1905-194?
National Library of Israel, TM 8 = 369
On the back of the postcard, a mother expresses the hope that her son, like her, will settle in Palestine to spur the creation of a Jewish state.

These days Jews can live almost anywhere. Even so, the majority of the 14 million-plus Jews worldwide reconcentrated in Israel (6.8 million) and the US (5.7 million). Across Europe there are approximately 1.4 million Jewish people —identified by religion, culture or lineage. Additionally, over 150,000 Israelis have also made Europe their home.

Europe boasts diverse Jewish communities —from its larger centres including Paris, London, Rome, Berlin, Marseilles and Budapest to smaller hubs including Stockholm, Prague, Warsaw, Sofia and Zurich. There is a vast network of Jewish schools; Jewish music and culture festivals take place from Kyiv to Florence, and there are over 120 Jewish museums across Europe such as the one in Girona, that is dedicated to the history of the Catalan Jewish communities during the Middle Ages.

A Jewish revival is underway —resurgent antisemitism notwithstanding. Some believe Jewish civilization is

marching inevitably toward an "ingathering of the exiles" destination, Israel. The Jews' distinctive calendar, language, history, and civilization link them to this remarkable place.

Since political Zionism took off in the 1880s, wave after wave of immigrants headed to the land of Israel. After the Holocaust (1933-1945), the survivors mostly abandoned Europe and many came to Israel from the DP camps. With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the "ingathering of the exiles" dramatically accelerated: 900,000 displaced Jews from the Arab and Muslim worlds came. Jewry continued to "ingather" from Iran (1979) and Ethiopia (since 1984) and —nearly 1 million— from the former Soviet Union (1989).

Globally, Jewish communities continue to face challenges while also promoting an active Jewish life and celebrating their achievements. After 2,000 years, having been scattered to the ends of the earth, Jews now have the astonishing option of living in a sovereign Israel or a vibrant Diaspora.



Promotional flyer for the popular London Jewish food festival, *Gefilte Fest*
National Library of Israel, European Jewish Ephemera Collection

Where to next on the Jewish journey?

Journeys. A history of the Jewish People

July 2021__March 2022

An original idea by the European Jewish Heritage Association and the National Library of Israel

European Association for the Preservation and Promotion of Jewish Culture (AEPJ)
AEPJ is a European association made up of 23 associated entities that share the mission of preserving and promoting Jewish culture and heritage on the European continent. These objectives, the driving force behind the institution, are achieved through the development of two major projects: the European Days of Jewish Culture and the European Route of Jewish Heritage, which is declared a Great Cultural Itinerary by the Council of Europe.

National Library of Israel
Founded in 1892 in Jerusalem, the National Library of Israel (NLI) has a dual distinct mandate: to serve as a national library in both the State of Israel and the international Jewish community. Its extensive collections contain a large number of materials in various formats, on the history and culture of the Jewish People, the State of Israel and the Land of Israel throughout the centuries.

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