

The Revitalized Community

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Though there have been Turkish Jews present in Turkey since Hellenic Times, the Turkish Jewish population was at its peak during the early years of the Ottoman Empire during the 1400s. This was a result of the Inquisition taking place in Spain where Queen Isabella sent Christopher Columbus and the Sephardic Jewish heretics to other countries throughout the world. One of the main places they landed was the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans had the 'millet' system where each religious community was governed by its own religious rules with disputes being resolved internally unless it dealt with Muslims. Then it would go to Sharia law courts. This meant that the Jewish population was able to live and rule using its own legislative and judicial systems. They ruled using Halachic Law, the Jewish law that comes from the biblical books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) and the external Gemara, Zohar, the Mishnah and other major commentative books in the Jewish faith. When the Ottoman Empire fell and Turkey became a Muslim majority country, however, the environment began to change. Not only were there economic reasons to leave Turkey, with the state of Israel coming into existence and its subsequent wars with the Arab states, the Jewish people in Turkey came under threat from terrorist attacks. The result has been a dramatic decline in the Jewish population, with only about 15,000 Jews remaining in the country.

During our visit, I had the opportunity to meet with the executive staff of the Chief Rabbinate's Office in Istanbul where I learned about the structure of the Jewish community in Turkey today. I also was able to visit the Jewish Museum of Turkey to learn about the history of the Jewish people in the country. Also informing my understanding were our visits to the old churches in the Cappadocia region of Turkey and the Hagia Sophia Mosque in Istanbul.

What I found most fascinating was that the Jewish people in Turkey today are working hard to focus on synagogue and building preservation. In 2011, the Turkish government gave Jews and Christians in Turkey the ability to reclaim property that the government had taken over in the

1930s, so the Jewish community has been working hard to renew or repurpose former synagogues as schools instead of tattoo shops and to resurrect via a weekly magazine the ancient Ladino language, a mix of Hebrew and Spanish used by the Sephardic Jews. The emphasis on preserving Turkish Jewish heritage has been a key goal and has been critical in keeping the Turkish Jewish community together.