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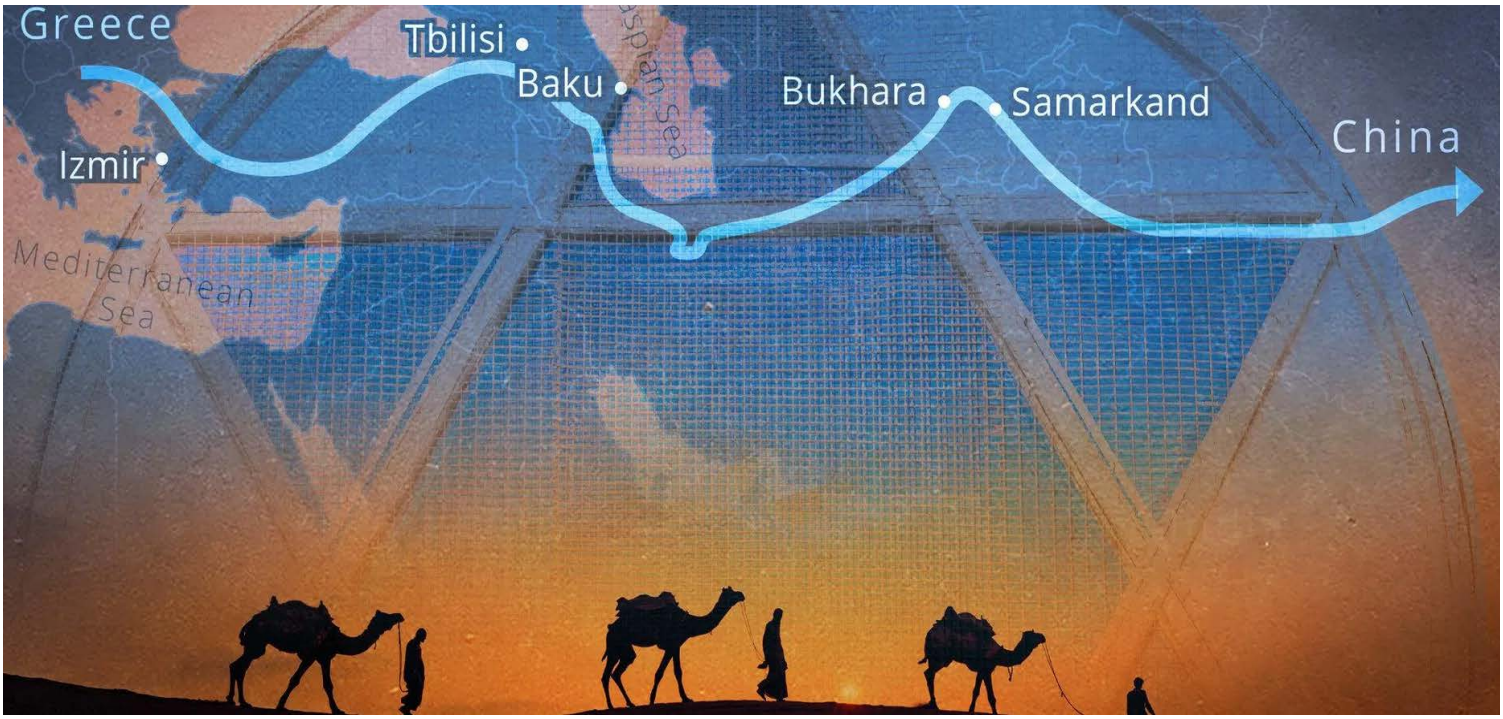
REDISCOVERED TREASURES

A new initiative reopens the ancient 'Jewish Silk Road' with a message for today's travelers **Moshe Gilad** **Page 8**

HAARETZ

The 'Jewish Silk Road' Is Coming Back to Life

The historical Silk Road, stretching from Italy to China, has seen renewed interest in recent years. A new project aims to trace Jewish culture and history along the famous trade network, from Venice to Izmir and on to Uzbekistan, India and China.



Credit: Ingimage / Artwork by Anastasia



Moshe Gilad
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In the Catalan Atlas, drawn by Abraham Cresques, a 14th-century Jewish cartographer from Mallorca, a convoy of camels can be seen with tiny figures beside them – Marco Polo and his uncles, crossing Central Asia en route from Venice to China. This stunningly drawn atlas is one testament to the attention given to and popularity of the Silk Road, some 700 years ago.

The historical Silk Road included several ancient trade routes, some of them two millennia old, stretching from China in the east to Italy in the west. The paths of the age-old trading artery traversed Central Asia, allowing merchants to transport along it not only tea, spices and paper, but also ideas, knowledge, and religious beliefs. The trails of the Silk Road hold within them adventure, mystery, commerce, brave nomads, faiths and legendary tales.

The road, in its various branches, terrestrial and maritime, has been seeing a renaissance in recent years. The World Tourism Organization, the UN's tourism agency, has been active along it since 1993, promoting a series of international tourism ventures. Thirty-four countries operate under this umbrella alongside Israel, including Italy, Turkey, Iran, Uzbekistan and China.

Now, a new initiative is taking shape, centered in Israel, dubbed the Jewish Silk Road. The project is led by an Israeli-American NGO called World Jewish Travel, headed by Jack Gottlieb.

The Jewish Silk Road is an effort to locate, collect and make accessible Jewish sites, museums, monuments, synagogues and graveyards along the routes stretching from Italy to China, with side routes to India and other countries. Five countries have been added to the project's website for the first stage – Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Uzbekistan and India. Soon, Singapore and other countries along the Silk Road are to be added.



The Gumbaz Synagogue in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Credit: BOISVIEUX CHRISTOPHE / HEMIS.FR

The site offers information about synagogues, Jewish quarters, and any other sites connected to Jewish institutions. Thus far, the project involves 15 cities in the five aforementioned countries. The main cities on the route are Izmir in Turkey, Tbilisi in Georgia, Baku in Azerbaijan, Bukhara in Uzbekistan and Cochin in India.

Gottlieb says that the new tourism and culture initiative is aimed at providing information about Jewish sites along the Silk Road and enrich the Jewish and historical content for those traveling through these countries. Thus, travelers will be able to get links to information about the Jewish past of these cities and information about restorations, upgrades, and Jewish sites along the road.

The motivation driving the participant countries, according to Gottlieb, is not just tourism-related or cultural, but also an opportunity presented by the project to promote tolerance. The project gives the participating countries an incentive to maintain, invest, and improve the infrastructure of Jewish heritage sites.

“I’m not a religious person, but I went to a yeshiva in the United States. Most Jews in the world define themselves as cultural. So I was interested in finding a way for these Jews to express themselves,” Gottlieb says of how he got started. “I was really interested in Jewish heritage and I went to Eastern Europe. The situation wasn’t very welcoming, and it took six months to organize each trip. When I got back, I began to build a digital platform to help travelers get information about Jewish sites. I started with heritage sites. Places where you can find Jewish culture and food. Few people travel from Israel to these destinations currently, and the potential is huge. At the actual destinations, they understand the potential and invest in the preservation of Jewish heritage sites.”



The Etz Chaim Synagogue in the Turkish city of Izmir. There are nine still-functioning synagogues in the Jewish Quarter of the city. Credit: Yusuf Tubi

Is there something unique about Jewish sites along the Silk Road?

“What we’re really dealing with is a search for echoes of lost cultures. The Silk Road is a huge phenomenon. Everyone talks about the Silk Road, and no one talks about the Jews along the road. These are enormous treasures. The interesting thing about all these sites is that there was no Holocaust in Central Asia. In Europe, history is before and after the Holocaust.

In Central Asia, it’s not, so you can find a lot of the physical evidence of what was there, like synagogues, graveyards, and monuments hundreds of years old. It allows us to organize a visit with an authentic Jewish view.
“It’s important to remember that not all countries in the region are in the same situation – Georgia, for instance, has developed tourism and also has more visitors from Israel. In other countries, things are different. Countries like Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan are only starting to develop this field. The refreshing change to me is that the five countries in the project want to cooperate and work together. In Western Europe and in Israel, too, people can be very cynical. In Central Asia, you don’t have this cynicism.

These countries are built on tolerance. Their image in Israel is wrong. Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, for instance, are Muslim, but they’re not Middle Eastern and not Arab countries. The religious and cultural tolerance in these countries stood out to me.”

Will you add more countries to the project?

"I purposely didn't take China or Italy. What happens in the middle of the road is more interesting to me. What happened in China and Italy is better known. Central Asia is much more mysterious."

In fact, there is no historical route like the one you drew.

“The Silk Road route we drew on the map was artificial on purpose. The principal section of the Silk Road ran through Iran and Afghanistan. We can’t go there and so we bypass and stretch the route to other destinations. The practical side is very important. It has to be. If I don’t get the people to visit, they won’t build the infrastructure. Preservation is important and I’m not waiting years. I’m 72. I’m not waiting here.”

Before the Muslims

Zeev Levin, a historian at the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem, says the term “Silk Road” is entirely Western. According to him, while the Silk Road was not invented as a tourism gimmick but was in fact an actual trade route, it is frequently presented as the former in our day.

Levin described to us the Jewish past that existed along the entire length of the Silk Road. Jews settled in the central Asian region as early as over a millennium ago. There is evidence of Jewish settlement there going back to the 10th century. Jews, many of them Persian merchants, lived in western China and in the major cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, now in Uzbekistan.

Levin points out that it should be kept in mind that the Jewish communities being examined in this context are altogether different from one another. The Jewish community living in the city of Kaifeng in the Hunan province of China between the 12th and 19th centuries was influenced by Chinese culture. The Jews who lived in Uzbekistan were influenced by the cultures of Bukhara and Samarkand. The Jews of the Caucasus differ from these other groups, and the Georgians are also different because they lived under Christian culture.

“As a historian, I see the Jewish Silk Road project as a link between Jewish communities that developed separately from one another,” Levin says. “Each of these communities was cut off from significant Jewish populations and therefore absorbed many influences from their near environment, and developed in strong symbiosis with the local environment.”



A 1700 synagogue brought to Jerusalem from Vittorio Veneto, Italy. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

Were the Jews a significant factor along the route in the days of Marco Polo?

“They were not especially prominent as merchants on the Silk Road. The data and the stories cited by Marco Polo were evidently exaggerated. We know with certainty that in the Timurid Empire, which was established by the Turco-Mongolian conqueror Timur in the 14th and 15th centuries, there were Jews were engaged in silk production. They were actually not merchants. Rather, they were engaged in the production process.

“The great financial renaissance of Jews living on the Silk Road occurred at a much later time, following the Russian colonial occupation in the 19th century. It was there that the Jews, in large part due to their fluency in other languages, became the immediate middlemen between local forces and occupation forces.”

Is there any early evidence of a Jewish presence along the Silk Road?

“One of the few things is the Afghan Genizah [a collection of hundreds of Jewish manuscript fragments found in the caves of Afghanistan] dating to the 10th century, which may now be found in the National Library in Jerusalem. It should be recalled that Jewish presence in this region predated the Muslim presence. They described themselves as the original demographic group of the region, not as immigrants or foreigners. The synagogues that you see today are relatively new. There is little evidence or remains that might indicate any Jewish presence, except for oral sources.”

A cultural medley

The knowledge base assembled by Gottlieb’s organization presents a plethora of Jewish sites along the length of the Silk Road. Nearly all of them post-date the 14th century, but they nevertheless form a long and fascinating medley of Jewish culture that linked Europe with Asia.

To feel something of the Jewish side of Venice, along the western edge of the Silk Road, I first made my way to Jerusalem. As part of its collection of historic synagogues, the Israel Museum has a synagogue brought from Vittorio Veneto, a town that lies 80 kilometers from Venice.

The spectacular synagogue, built in 1700, was situated in a private home and was brought to Jerusalem in 1965, when the museum was built. Gioia Perugia, the storage and collection manager in the museum’s Jewish art wing, says that the Jewish residents of the city were silk and leather merchants. The synagogue was used for prayer for 200 years, and also served as a site for events and concerts.

This week, entirely by coincidence, I listened to the singing of Cantor Shani Ben Or, who was there to conduct preparations for an event in which she is participating. The juxtaposition between the grand structure of the Venetian synagogue, which resembles a gorgeous Baroque theater, with its carved and gilded ornamentation, and Ben-Or’s pure sung prayers, sounded at that moment of grace like an act of magic underway in Jerusalem.



The Great Synagogue of Tbilisi, also known as the Akhaltsikhe Synagogue, was built in 1910 by Georgian Jews from Akhaltsikhe. Credit: Beit Israel

If one travels east from Venice, one reaches the first stop on the Jewish Silk Road project – the Turkish city of Izmir. The two most prominent synagogues in the city, both of which date from the 17th century, are the Etz Chaim synagogue, which has been rebuilt several times following fires, and the Salom Sinagogu, where the walls are decorated in floral patterns. There are nine still-functioning synagogues in the Jewish quarter of Izmir, and a large Jewish community still resides in the city.

The Israel-based Mordechai Kiryati Foundation has in recent years invested much effort in the restoration of the city's "synagogue row" and establishment of a Jewish museum.

Further east, in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, there are several prominent Jewish sites that were built in the early 20th century. The Great Synagogue is situated in the old quarter of Tbilisi. The building, also known as the Akhaltsikhe Synagogue, was built in 1910 by Georgian Jews from Akhaltsikhe. It is now one of the city's most important tourism sites, and has been recognized as a national cultural monument.

The Ashkenazi synagogue in Tbilisi is named Beit Rachel and was built by Jews from Tskhinvali in the year 1910. Along with all of these cultural icons, Tbilisi is home to the David Baazov Museum of History of Georgian Jews. The museum was established 90 years ago and includes archaeological, ethnographic and historical finds.



A synagogue built in 1700 in Vittorio Veneto, Italy, and brought to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 1965. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

Lasha Zhvania, Georgia's ambassador to Israel, explains that the main significance of the project spearheaded by Gottlieb is essentially the search for Jewish roots and remnants of Jewish heritage in Georgia. Zhvania argues that relations between Israel and Georgia did not begin 30 years ago but instead hundreds of years earlier.

"Jewish heritage along the Silk Road is important because it grants knowledge of the important Jewish culture in our region. The first Jews arrived in Georgia well over 2,000 years ago, and this should be taken into account. They are the ones who introduced belief in a single god, and in so doing promoted the Christian faith. Jewish culture flourished in the Caucasus region and there are not many people who know about it."

Will the Jewish Silk Road project create a new channel of tourism?

"In 2022, some 210,000 visitors from Israel made their way to Georgia, but they weren't tourists searching for Jewish culture. They come mainly to enjoy Georgia's nature and cuisine. The Jewish Silk Road initiative will help us attract culture tourists from Israel. In general, it's a regional cooperative concept in which we are participating, in a variety of aspects. Tourism, even discounting the Jewish context, has since the 1990s been one of the elements of the Silk Road. Georgia has a very rich heritage of the road.



Jack Gottlieb. 'I'm not a religious person. Most Jews in the world define themselves as cultural.'
Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

"The preservation of Jewish sites in Georgia is good, even without considering the current initiative. Numerous sites have been restored, and are well preserved. The Jewish museum underwent comprehensive renovation and was opened six years ago. It is excellent proof of the Georgians' attitude toward the Jewish community."

In beautiful Bukhara

Azerbaijan, the next stop along the Silk Road, is considered a particularly tolerant Muslim country. In Baku, on the west bank of the Caspian Sea, you can visit the synagogue of the Mountain Jews – an ancient Azerbaijani Jewish community, the members of which moved to Baku in the early 20th century. The building was restored and reopened about 10 years ago.

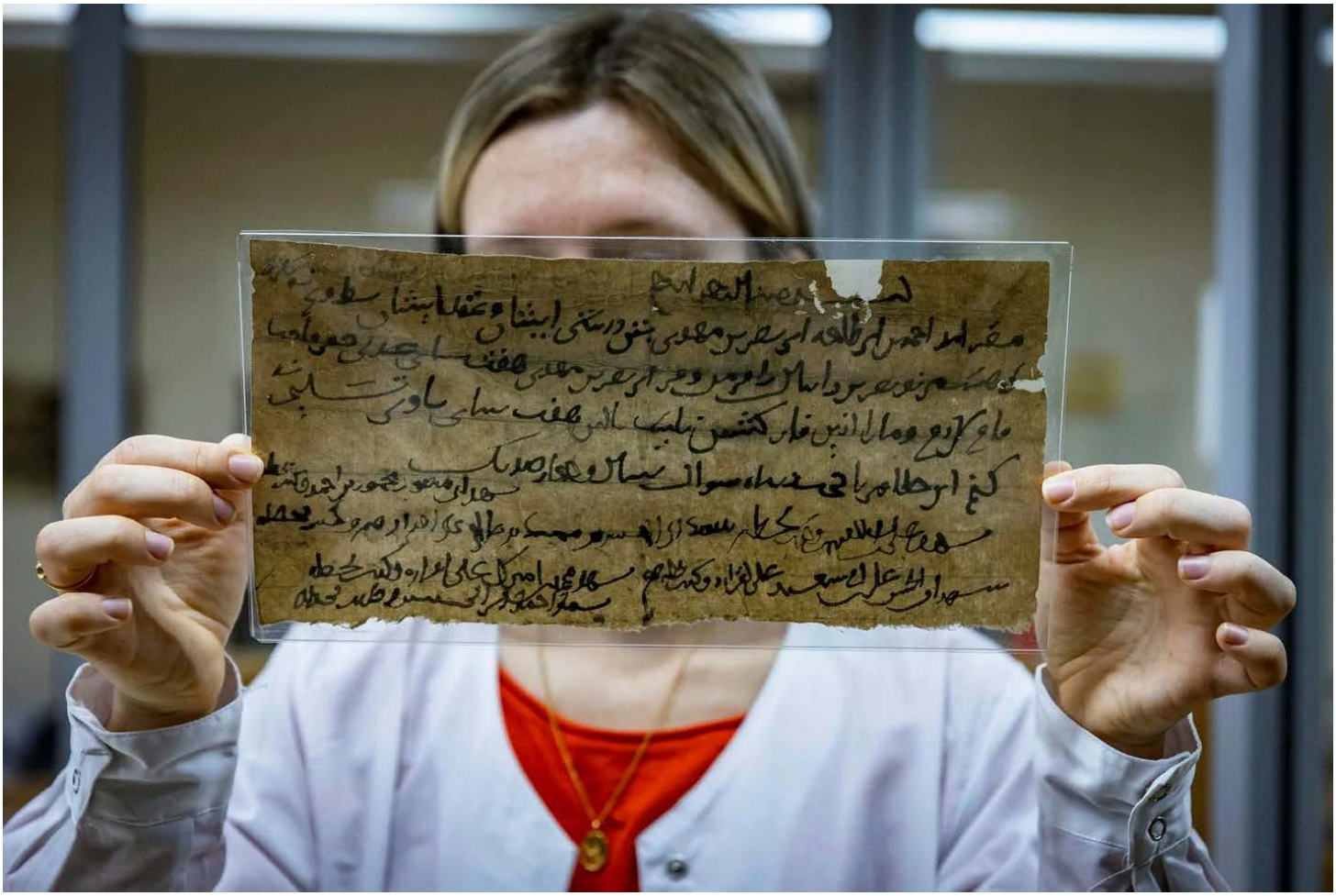
Lying east of the Caspian Sea is Uzbekistan, where several of the larger and better-known Jewish communities along the Silk Road were located. Most of the interest lies in the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. In the Middle Ages, Bukhara became the heart of Jewish life in Central Asia. Its ancient homes are now facing a risk of extinction, and were placed on the list of the World Monuments Watch project in 2020 to encourage the documentation and urban preservation of the homes of Bukharan Jews. Along with these, Bukhara has hundreds of very well-preserved mosques, madrassas, khans and bazaars.

Walking through the streets of the Jewish quarter in Bukhara, one sees traditional Jewish Bukharan pottery houses and buildings in need of preservation.

Many of the homes have engraved doors, often with pillars or support beams that are three centuries old. Uzbekistan's ambassador to Israel, Feruza Makhmudova, says at the beginning of our conversation that living in Uzbekistan – a conservative Muslim state – are 130 different ethnic groups, including the adherents of 16 different religions. Judaism is one of them.

"We take pride in our tolerance and our hospitality," she says. "We harbor great respect for members of all religions and cultures, and for all minorities, with special respect for Judaism. I am frequently asked about the Muslim and conservative character of our country, but this is a question that testifies to the scant familiarity of many Israelis with Uzbekistan. We are an open and hospitable country. This is the Islam that is worth getting to know in Uzbekistan."

Some 11,000 Israelis visited Uzbekistan last year. There are eight Jewish culture centers active in the country. "This heritage is part of our culture and identity," Makhmudova says. "The objective of our participation in the Jewish Silk Road project is to offer Israelis an encounter with their own heritage, one we are preserving. This is in collaboration with tourism organizations in Israel to bring more Israelis to visit our country. A major effort is now underway in Uzbekistan to improve tourism-related infrastructures, and modern hotels and better roads are now being built. A new airport is being built in Samarkand, and the Jewish museum in Bukhara is now in the planning stages."



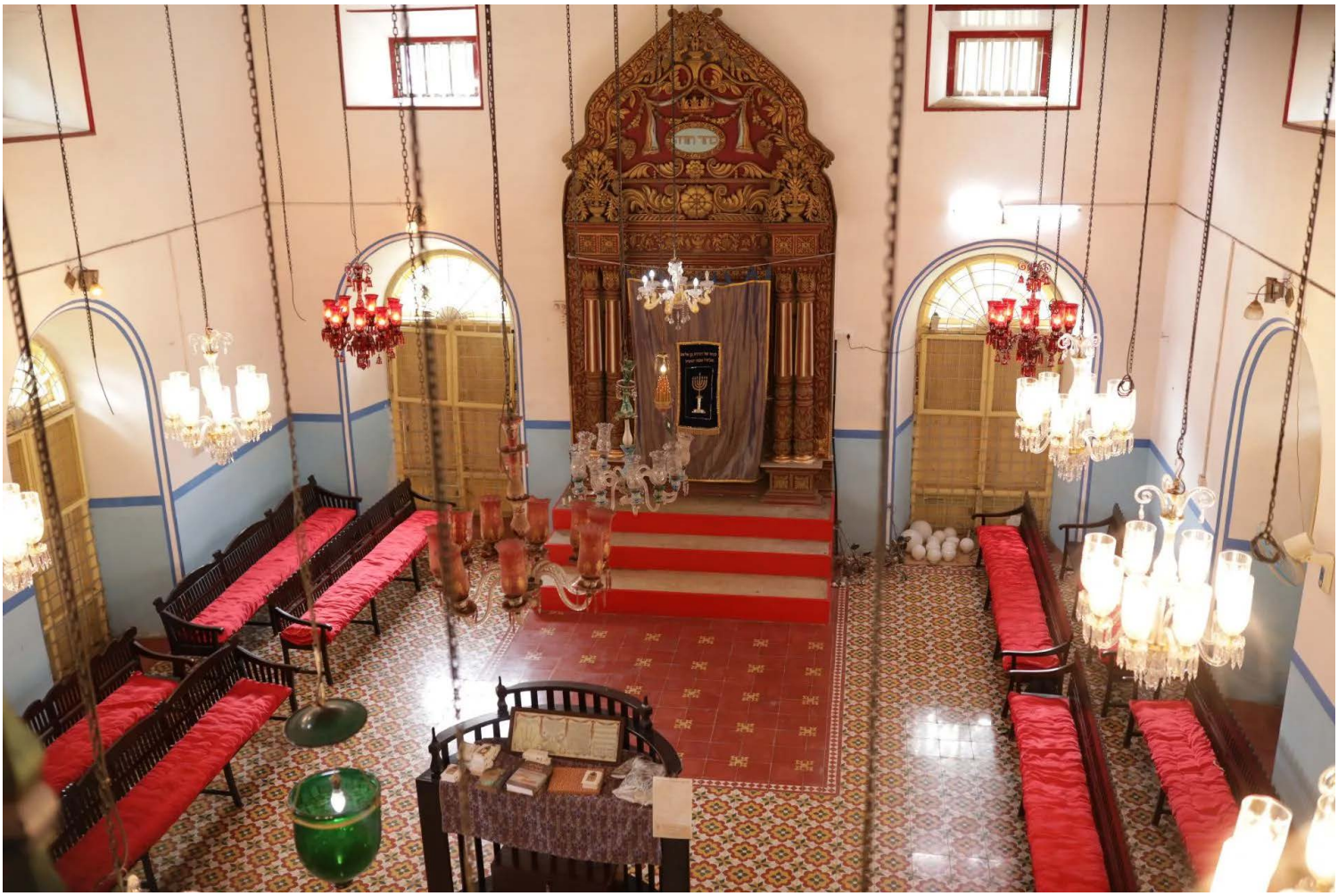
A document from the Afghan Genizah. Evidence of Jewish life on the Silk Road. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

The Afghan Genizah

Evidence of Jewish life on the Silk Road has been found in recent years in caves in Afghanistan, slightly south of Uzbekistan. The 220 documents known as the Afghan Genizah are thought to be the archive of a Jewish family of merchants that lived in northern Afghanistan in the 11th through 13th centuries.

In order to see actual and rare evidence of the existence of an ancient Jewish community on the road, I went all the way to the National Library in Jerusalem, where documents of the Afghan Genizah are kept.

Samuel Thrope, curator of the library's Islam and Middle East collection, showed me two of the original documents – a page of the Mishna written in Hebrew characters, and a promissory note in ancient Persian.



The Kadavumbhagham Ernakulam Synagogue in Kerala, which some say was established in the 13th century. Credit: Kerala Ttourism Ministry

Thrope says these are the only authentic remnants we have from this period. The texts refer to religion and traditions and are written in black ink on yellowing paper.

Speaking on the Hebrew-language podcast "The Librarians," historian Haggai Ben-Shammai, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, described the Jews who lived a millennium ago in northern Afghanistan as being a mediating element in society.

Ben-Shammai emphasized the importance of the region at the time, with its flourishing economy, advanced scientific knowhow, astronomers and philosophers. According to him, the region was ruled at the time from Baghdad, which served as a financial and cultural capital. The documents found in the genizah involve the commercial aspects of the lives of local Jews. They include legal permits to lease landholdings and are written in Persian, Arabic, Aramaic and Hebrew.



A detail from the Kadavumbagam Synagogue, dating to the 16th century, has been on display at the museum since the 1990s after being transferred in its entirety from Cochin to Jerusalem. Credit: Olivier Fitoussim.

Among the documents are also religious and literary manuscripts and poems. It is a cultural treasure trove that testifies to the life of the community between the 11th and 13th centuries. After that date, the region was invaded by the horsemen of the Mongol Empire, which occupied immense tracts of land, caused terrible destruction, and brought ruin upon the Jewish communities. For 500 years, until the 18th century, nothing at all was known about the life of the Jews of the area.

The maritime route to Cochin

The main route of the Silk Road stretches eastward to China. In Gottlieb's project, another stop has been added, one that runs much further south and abuts the maritime route of the Silk Road: Cochin, at the southern tip of India.

The most famous Jewish site in Cochin is the magnificent Paradesi Synagogue, built in 1568 for the city's prosperous Jewish community. It's the only one of the city's seven synagogues that is still functional.

Here, too, the synagogue's restoration came from the Israel Museum, where the Kadavumbagam Synagogue, dating to the 16th century, has been on display at the museum since the 1990s after being transferred in its entirety from Cochin to Jerusalem. This week, I stood before it full of astonishment. In the course of its restoration, the synagogue's wooden furniture was brought back to its original colors, mainly dark red hues.

Perugia, the collection manager at the Israel Museum, says that thanks to the maritime Silk Road, the synagogue contains European influences and a large blend of cultures, complete with local influences from the southern Indian state of Kerala. Some 500 years of Jewish history has been perfectly preserved in the synagogue, which offers added proof that Jewish merchants were active on the Silk Road practically without interruption, from that time and up to the present.