

Centuries-old synagogue in India holds a service for first time in decades

by [Fred de Sam Lazaro](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue

A nearly 900-year-old synagogue recently held its first sabbath service since 1972 in one of the diaspora's most far-flung places: the coastal Indian city of Cochin.

Kadavumbagam Synagogue drew participants from four continents for what could be the last such observance in a region whose once-thriving Jewish communities have mostly migrated to Israel.

"I'm very sad to see communities disappear," said Yehoshua Sivan, who came from Israel for the service. "On the other hand, I'm very happy to see that after all these years of dispersion the prophecy of the return to the land of Israel is in my time—I'm part of it—is being realized. At least we see how life was once here."

Jewish life along India's Malabar Coast dates back to the ancient spice trade which drew explorers from across the sea. In ancient times, Jews from Yemen and Mesopotamia came to trade, and some settled in the area. Others came from Spain and Portugal after the Inquisition.

However, Malabari Jews began leaving for the Holy Land in the 1950s, seeking better economic prospects, religious fulfillment, or both. Some synagogues and Jewish cemeteries were handed over to the municipal authorities, often falling into neglect or eyed for redevelopment.

"The coming generation must know that there was a Jewish community here," said C. Karmachandran, a retired professor who now heads a local historic preservation committee. "One of the most important criticisms that India faces at present is the religious intolerance between segments of society, and this is a lesson of tolerance."

There's little history of anti-Semitism in India, according to scholars such as Karmachandran.

"They were given all the protection by the rulers, as well as the local people, to maintain their culture, their religion, and this in fact is the living symbol of that particular lofty tradition," he said during a tour of another synagogue in the small

town of Mala, which is also in the state of Kerala. “They were very good friends, they were very good neighbors, they were very good traders.”

In Cochin, the regional hub, only about 30 Jews remain. One of them is Elias Josephai, the synagogue’s caretaker. He runs a nursery and aquarium supply business in the space where children once studied on the sabbath.

The synagogue proper serves as a dusty warehouse. Its sacred scrolls were donated years ago to a museum in Israel.

“I cry every sabbath,” Josephai said. “Every holiday, I cry in my heart.”

Ari Greenspan, a Brooklyn native who lives in Israel, heard the same lament when he visited the synagogue a year ago on a vacation in India.

“When he told us that they hadn’t prayed in that synagogue since 1972, I said to myself, I’ve got to come back with a group of ten men,” Greenspan said, referring to the minyan, or Jewish quorum, required to hold a complete Orthodox prayer service.

Greenspan did indeed organize a return tour of India’s Jewish communities, working with the Orthodox Union, which encourages Jewish heritage tours.

“I came here out of interest to see the various ways Jews have lived throughout the world,” said Larry Linhoff, a Highland Park, New Jersey, resident, who was one of 35 people in the group. “With the changing situation there are fewer and fewer Jewish communities as things become more centralized.”

Michael Wimpfheimer, also of New Jersey, appreciated the chance to see a building that went unused for a long time serve its purpose again as a prayer space.

“It’s kind of a revitalization, even for a short time,” he said.

For Josephai, it was a dream 44 years in the making. As the visitors entered the sanctuary, they praised their host.

“He should live to be 120 years old,” Greenspan said, using a common Jewish expression. “When he goes, that’s it. . . . Two thousand years of Cochin is gone.”

Josephai plans to retire in four years and do what thousands of his fellow Malabar Jews have done over the years: make Aliyah—settle in Israel.

“I’ll keep my heart over here and then go,” Josephai said. “I love India, but it is inevitable.”

It is a wrenching decision, leaving a land he holds dear and a place so influential in forming who he is.

“One day, today or tomorrow, I have to leave the country,” he said. “Not because of discrimination but as a Jew, to live as a Jew.” —*Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*

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