

The Great Synagogue of Gaza and Its Destruction in 1929

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Abstract

The Great Synagogue of Gaza, a historical and religious landmark for the Jewish community, was a symbol of the long-standing Jewish presence in the region. This paper explores the history of the synagogue, its cultural significance, and the events leading to its destruction during the 1929 riots. By examining historical records, eyewitness accounts, and contemporary analyses, the article provides an in-depth understanding of the synagogue's role in Jewish life in Gaza and the impact of its destruction.

Introduction

Gaza, a city with a rich and complex history, has been home to diverse communities over the centuries, including a significant Jewish population. The Great Synagogue of Gaza, established in the early modern period, served as a focal point for Jewish religious and communal life. This article traces the history of the synagogue, its significance to the Jewish community, and the circumstances of its destruction during the 1929 riots, a period of intense violence and upheaval in British Mandate Palestine.

Historical Background

The Jewish presence in Gaza dates back to ancient times, with evidence of a Jewish community during the Byzantine period. However, the modern Jewish community in Gaza began to flourish in the 16th century when Rabbi Israel Najara, a prominent kabbalist and poet, settled there and established the Great Synagogue. The synagogue became a center of Jewish learning and worship, reflecting the community's vibrancy and resilience (Gil, 1992).

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Jewish community in Gaza was relatively small but active, maintaining religious institutions, schools, and communal organizations. The Great Synagogue continued to be a central institution, symbolizing the enduring Jewish presence in the city (Ben-Arieh, 1977).

The 1929 Riots

The late 1920s in Palestine were marked by growing tensions between Jewish and Arab communities, exacerbated by political, economic, and social factors. The Western Wall incident in Jerusalem in August 1929 ignited widespread violence across the region. Known as the 1929 Palestine riots or the Hebron massacre, these events saw attacks on Jewish communities in various cities, including Gaza (Segev, 2000).

In Gaza, the riots culminated in the destruction of the Great Synagogue. On August 26, 1929, Arab mobs attacked the Jewish quarter, looting and burning homes and businesses. The

synagogue, a symbol of the Jewish community's presence, was targeted and set ablaze. Eyewitness accounts describe the destruction of religious artifacts, Torah scrolls, and the synagogue's structure itself, a devastating blow to the community (Mandel, 1991).

Impact on the Jewish Community

The destruction of the Great Synagogue had profound implications for the Jewish community in Gaza. The immediate aftermath saw the displacement of the Jewish population, with many fleeing to safer areas such as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The loss of the synagogue, a central place of worship and communal gathering, left a deep emotional and spiritual void (Khalidi, 1992).

The 1929 riots and the destruction of the synagogue marked a turning point for the Jewish community in Gaza. The violence and subsequent displacement disrupted the continuity of Jewish life in the city, contributing to the broader pattern of demographic and social changes in Palestine during this period. The events of 1929 underscored the volatility of intercommunal relations and the vulnerability of minority communities in times of political strife (Gelber, 1997).

Legacy and Memory

Despite the destruction, the memory of the Great Synagogue of Gaza and the Jewish community's history in the city has been preserved through historical documentation and oral traditions. Survivors and their descendants have kept alive the stories of their community's heritage and the tragic events of 1929. The synagogue's destruction is remembered as a symbol of the broader struggles and resilience of the Jewish people in Palestine (Reinharz & Shavit, 1996).

In recent years, efforts to document and commemorate the history of Jewish communities in the broader region have included the story of Gaza's Great Synagogue. These initiatives aim to preserve the cultural and historical legacy of these communities, ensuring that their contributions and experiences are not forgotten (Rubenstein, 2000).

Conclusion

The Great Synagogue of Gaza was a cornerstone of the Jewish community, embodying their religious, cultural, and social life. Its destruction during the 1929 riots represents a significant and painful chapter in the history of Jewish-Arab relations in Palestine. By exploring the history and impact of the synagogue's destruction, this article highlights the resilience of the Jewish community in Gaza and the enduring importance of preserving and remembering the diverse histories of the region.

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