

# Association Internationale Nébi Daniel

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## **THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ALEXANDRIA**

The Jewish Community of Alexandria grew during the past two centuries from 100 people in 1800 (Napoleon), to 1,100 in 1840 (Montefiore Census), 9,830 in 1897, 14,475 in 1907 and 24,829 in 1937 (Egyptian Government Population Census). It was estimated at around 30,000 in 1947. This growth mirrored Egypt's economic, political, cultural and social development in a hospitable and welcoming environment. This spirit of tolerance has to this day protected the members of the Community. The Jewish Community of Alexandria (the Community) currently numbers 4 men and 12 women.

Jews born in Alexandria are now living in Europe (mostly France, Great Britain, Italy, Switzerland), North America (USA & Canada), South America (Brazil, Argentina), Australia and Israel. They have formed over 12 associations worldwide whose objectives are to keep alive the cultural and social characteristics of this community, and transmit to future generations the traditions and memories of their native land. To quote a Jewish writer born in Egypt, "we left Egypt, but Egypt never left us".

The International Nebi Daniel Association (**AIND**) has to-date the support of 1200 Jewish families from these associations for one specific objective: the preservation of their cultural heritage as well as their religious and civil identity.

**AIND** is a completely apolitical, independent, not-for-profit association, legally registered in France. It wishes, in full compliance with Egyptian legislation, to cooperate with the Egyptian authorities in achieving the preservation of their ancestors' heritage. It is convinced that fulfilling this objective will not only benefit the descendants of this Community, but will also underline the image of tolerance and openness of Egypt throughout the world.

## **HERITAGE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN ALEXANDRIA**

The Community's remaining assets in Alexandria fall into 2 categories:

- A) Civil & religious Registers, Sepharim (Torah scrolls), books and archives.
- B) 2 synagogues, 3 cemeteries and 1 Pilgrimage site (Damanhour), as well as a number of revenue generating real-estate assets.

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## A. I. N. D.

Because of the constraints imposed on them, the Community representatives have denied access to the Registers and other moveable objects for copying, cataloguing or external examination. The second category of immovable assets has to find a mutually acceptable legal framework to ensure continuity beyond the present ageing community members.

### **Present situation of Registers**

There are approximately 200 registers recording births, marriages, divorce, deaths and miscellaneous certificates. The earliest registers date from 1830. Some of them require preservation. A few volumes are missing and a few pages have been torn out. As long as a rabbinical Bet Din (religious tribunal) was in operation, certificates were produced *and certified* based on the entries in the register. As a consequence of the action of our association, they are at present under lock and key, but access to them can also be arbitrary and difficult. Certificates currently issued based on the entries in the Registers are *not certified*.

### **AIND's Position:**

Registers are important to be able to *certify* one's Jewish origin to religious authorities outside Egypt in case of marriage or children's religious confirmation. In order to obtain Jewish burial rights, it is critical to *certify* within 24 hours the religious affiliation of the deceased.

These registers are also important for those who were stateless or deprived of their nationality, to enable them to confirm their civil status, even if they have since acquired a new nationality.

They are important for family and genealogical research, or for those who wish to visit their ancestors' graves.

Registers cannot be used for any so called "claims actions" since population figures and movements are clearly defined and known elsewhere.

### **Risks :**

- i) Disappearance of the registers, as in Izmir, Salonica and other communities of the old Ottoman Empire as a result of fire.
- ii) Constraints on access (cost, time, distance)
- iii) Precarious conditions under which the registers could ultimately be preserved.

**AIND Proposal:**

- Scan or microfilm all the registers at the expense of AIND.
- Maintain the originals on the Community's premises.
- Keep a copy at the “Consistoire Israélite de France”, under the aegis of the Chief Rabbi, to deliver certified documents based on those copies.
- Keep a copy at the Alexandria Library for researchers, if deemed appropriate.
- Computerised access of the registers for visitors to the Synagogue compound.

The Alexandria Library has agreed to provide technical assistance for the copying process. The Supreme Council of Antiquities has indicated that “Registers” were not under its jurisdiction.

We request that authorisation be given to the Community to allow such copies to be made, under supervision, outside of the Community premises with assurance that they will be returned to the Community.

**Present situation of Torah Scrolls/Sepharim**

Sepher Torah scrolls are manuscript copies on parchment of the Pentateuch, used regularly for readings during religious services. We believe that over 65 Torah scrolls are deposited in the Eliahou Hanavi Synagogue, following the closure of the other smaller Synagogues.

**AIND's Position:**

The quantity of scrolls is out of proportion with the present number of members. In order to maintain their religious status and value, the scrolls have to be used regularly and in accordance with Jewish law and tradition.

The scrolls belong to the community and not to their original donors.

We believe that the majority of the scrolls are under 100 years old: it would be easy to date them.

The scrolls were mainly imported from outside communities, as there never were Torah scribes in Alexandria during the modern period.

They have an important emotional connotation to Jews from Alexandria worldwide.

The Council of Antiquities has a list of the scrolls and has classified them as “Egyptian Antiquities”, thereby forbidding any potential export. This has, thankfully, temporarily preserved most of the scrolls; however it also condemns them to eventually disappear and we respectfully suggest that this serves no constructive purpose for Egypt or its Jewish community.

**Risks :**

- i) The scrolls are condemned to dust and moths if they are not used.
- ii) There is the risk of theft or fire
- iii) There are a number of examples of desecration in European and Arab countries in spite of good will and protection.

**AIND Proposal :**

We suggest:

- That an expert of the Supreme Council and a duly appointed rabbinical authority date each individual scroll. The date at which a scroll was written is generally found either at the beginning or the end of the scroll, whilst the calligraphy and layout can indicate the country where it was copied. Any expense for this study will be borne by **AIND**.
- Any scroll found to be more than 100 years old would fall under the protection of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.
- To retain:
  - 3 or 4 scrolls for actual use during prayers at the Synagogue.
  - 1 of the oldest scrolls at the Alexandria Library, if deemed appropriate.
  - 3 of the oldest scrolls, as exhibits, for visitors to the Synagogue.
- To re-introduce the balance to existing communities of Jews from Egypt around the world.
- To do so, if deemed appropriate, with gratitude and recognition in the presence of representatives of the Egyptian authorities.

The Supreme Council for Antiquities has promised to study our request after receipt of the inventory. We request that authorisation be given to the community to allow a dated inventory to be carried out under supervision.

**Present situation of Books and Archives**

There are approximately 2,000 books in a semi-basement at the Eliahou Hanavi Synagogue, as well as the rabbinical archives and artistic Ketoubot (marriage contracts defining the responsibilities of the spouses). Through the sale of more than ten synagogues, there must also be other religious artefacts that were fortunately not sold.

**AIND Position and Proposal :**

Given the same risks as to the registers, it is necessary to catalogue this collection and to store them correctly. We therefore propose, in conjunction with the Community:

- To compile a catalogue and make it available to researchers in at least 3 languages.
- To make the Ketoubot available to the relevant families upon request.
- To exhibit part of this collection at the Alexandria Library, if deemed appropriate.
- To exhibit part of this collection for visitors.
- To offer some of the prayer books to the new communities around the world.

**Present situation of Synagogues, Cemeteries, etc**

The Eliahou Hanavi Synagogue and the Menasce Synagogue have to this day been protected thanks to the Egyptian Government. They are respectively under the control of the Supreme Council for Antiquities and the Waqf. The local Community has maintained the gardens and the interior. They also assume responsibility for the 3 cemeteries in the centre of town (Mazarita and Chatby). Access to the tomb of ‘Saint’ Abou-Hassira in Damanhour has temporarily been forbidden for the annual pilgrimage of Moroccan Jews.

**Risks :**

The future maintenance of the Synagogues may not be systematically guaranteed and overseen if the Community were to disappear. Major repair on the buildings would cause strain on Egyptian Monument Budgets and could be postponed. Urban growth and congestion as well as pressure from real estate developers are grounds for concern:

- Under pressure, widespread plantation of new trees has taken place between the tombs at the Mazarita Cemetery to “hide” them from view of new surrounding high-rise buildings. Growth of these trees will create subsidence and destroy the tombs.
- Lack of maintenance could render access dangerous (overgrowth, snakes, scorpions).
- Regrettable precedents are evidence of these risks:
  - The Tantah cemetery has been reduced to a communal grave.
  - Tombs in the Cairo Bassatine cemetery were relocated for a road project.
  - Squatting in other cemeteries in Cairo; theft of tombstones recycled as marble.

**AIND Position and Proposal :**

To create, in conjunction with the Egyptian authorities, a mutually acceptable framework which will be sustainable beyond the life of the present Community leaders and will be funded through the revenues of the Community’s real estate assets, for:

- continuation of religious services
- preservation and maintenance of the Synagogues and cemeteries