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Contact:
Rabbi Steven Kaye
303.757.1372

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loss of its independence when Spain invaded the country in 1580 and the Spanish Prince Philip declared himself heir to the Portuguese throne—a claim he supported by citing Manuel’s marriage to the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella.

By 1600, Portugal had become a weak and backward country. The great project initiated by Prince Henry the Navigator that had propelled Portugal to power and prosperity had been undone.



PORTUGAL’S BEST PRESERVED

medieval synagogue is situated in the former Judiaria (Jewish Quarter) of Tomar, eighty-five miles north of Lisbon. From the exterior, the synagogue is indistinguishable from any of the homes or stores along the narrow Dr. Joaquim Jacinto Street—even in the best of times Jews here tried to keep a low public profile. Step inside, and the sanctuary’s grandeur is striking—a soaring vaulted ceiling supported by four elegant decorative columns symbolizing the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah) and twelve arches representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The *bimah*, or reader’s platform, stands in the center of the room facing the Torah ark in traditional Sephardic fashion. The synagogue’s architectural richness testifies to the prosperity of Tomar’s Jews in 1460, when the synagogue was completed, due in large measure to Henry the

Navigator’s having made the nearby Tomar Castle his residence and economic base, as well as the headquarters of the Order of Christ.

Like all other Jewish houses of worship in Portugal, the Tomar synagogue was shut down in 1496. It was then used as a prison and later as a storage facility. The synagogue remained in private hands until 1923, when the eminent Hebraist and engineer Samuel Schwarz purchased the building and donated it to the state on condition that it be used as a Jewish museum. In 1939, it was inaugurated as the Abraham Zacuto Jewish Museum. Today, the Jews in Tomar are too few to form a *minyan*, but they have devoted themselves to maintaining the synagogue as a museum and guiding visitors through it as well as the medieval *mikveh* discovered in 1985 during renovations of an adjacent building. The collection ranges from a sixth-century Jewish tombstone to a Torah scroll donated in 1992, when a delegation from London conducted Yom Kippur services in the synagogue—the first time in 500 years.

Our guide, a man in his eighties wearing a Greek sailor’s cap, asked as many questions as he answered. As we prepared to leave, he posed his last question almost in a whisper: “Have your children stayed Jewish?” When he heard our answer, he smiled, relieved to hear that we, too, were doing our part to keep alive the Jewish people and preserve the legacy of our ancestors. □



Portugal’s medieval Tomar Synagogue is today the Abraham Zacuto Jewish Museum.