

Lecture Transcript:

Karaites in Egypt: The Preservation of Jewish-Egyptian Heritage Sunday, September 13, 2020

Louise Bertini:

Hello, everyone, and good afternoon or good evening, depending on where you are joining us from. And welcome to our special September lecture, titled, "Karaites in Egypt: The Preservation of Egyptian-Jewish Heritage." I'm Dr. Louise Bertini, the executive director of the American Research Center in Egypt. ARCE is a nonprofit organization composed of educational and cultural institutions, professional scholars and members alike whose mission is to support research on all aspects of Egyptian history and culture, foster a broader knowledge about Egypt among the general public and to strengthen American-Egyptian cultural ties. I want to extend a special welcome to any ARCE members who are joining us today, and if you are not already a member, I encourage you to visit our website, arce.org, where you can find further information on how to join. I want to direct your attention to the Q and A button, to which you can pose questions at the end of the lecture. Today's lecture is also done in partnership with the Drop of Milk Association, whose mission is to promote interfaith tolerance through the preservation of Egyptian-Jewish heritage and promotion of its history through cultural events. I will shortly be introducing Magda Haroun, the head of the Egyptian-Jewish community in Cairo. In 2019, ARCE, in partnership with the Drop of Milk Association, was awarded a grant from the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation to document the remaining areas of the historic Bassatine Cemetery, as well as pilot a conservation project in the two burial grounds belonging to the Menasha and Lichaa families, who are prominent members of Egypt's Karaite community. We are very grateful to the support of the US Ambassadors Fund as well as to the US Embassy in Cairo and US Department of State for their support in this project. And with that, I want to thank and introduce our first speaker, His Excellency Jonathan Cohen, Ambassador of the United States of America to the Arab Republic of Egypt. Welcome, ambassador.

Ambassador Cohen:

Thank you very much, Louise. It's a real pleasure to be with everybody this evening. I know there are many friends out there, so thank you for joining us. Can you all hear me? Okay, good. As I said, it's a pleasure to be part of ARCE's Virtual Lecture series, to discuss the important work that's taken place to conserve some of the most historic portions of the Jewish Bassatine Cemetery in Cairo. And tonight, you'll hear from panelists who are well more well-versed than me about the deep historical significance of Bassatine, about the Egyptian-Jewish community and about how the Bassatine Cemetery is increasing the world's understanding of Egypt's Jewish cultural heritage. One year ago, ARCE began to work to conserve Bassatine and produce a management plan for the site to ensure that the cemetery, believed to be the second oldest Jewish cemetery in the world, will be accessible and informative for future visitors. To date, ARCE has completed survey work, documentation, solid waste removal operations and extensive conservation and restoration work at the Karaite Graveyard. These efforts were made possible through the US Department of State's Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, AFCP, which supports the preservation of cultural sites, objects and forms of traditional cultural expression around the world. Since 2001, more than a dozen AFCP projects have been implemented here in Egypt to preserve archaeological and cultural heritage sites from Pharaonic, Islamic, Coptic and Jewish civilization in Egypt. The Bassatine Cemetery is important because it's a historic site, but it's especially noteworthy because it's an illustration of Egypt's historic pluralism. It showcases the country's ancient cultural diversity, with communities of differing religious and other identities living and working together. This foundation of diversity lends strength to and is a focal point for present-day Egyptian society. The US Embassy in Cairo and I, on a personal level, are proud to partner in conserving and protecting Egypt's heritage site, including Bassatine, and we're pleased that our efforts aligned with the commitment of the leadership in Egypt to preserve the heritage of religious groups here. This work also protects Egypt's cultural resources and helps further the sustainable management of Egypt's cultural heritage. I'd like to commend ARCE, which is working to bring the Ambassadors Fund conservation and restoration efforts at Bassatine Cemetery to a successful conclusion in December 2020. And I'd also like to thank the Drop of Milk Association for its partnership on this

project and for its tireless efforts to help raise awareness of Egypt's Jewish heritage. Both ARCE and Drop of Milk continue to envision and creatively develop ways in which the Bassatine Cemetery can further be renovated to gather the community, to give historic background for those interested in learning about Egyptian-Jewish heritage and to ensure the future sustainability of the site. We look forward to hearing about your continued success and progress. Thank you all again for attending this evening, and thank you for your interest in the conservation work at Bassatine.

Louise Bertini:

Thank you very much, Ambassador Cohen. We're very honored that you can join us today. Our next speaker is Magda Haroun, who was selected as president of the Jewish Community in Cairo, or JCC, in 2013. Under her leadership, the JCC has restarted the Drop of Milk Association. So welcome, Magda. Magda, you're muted.

Magda Haroun:

Yes. Okay. Thank you, Louise, and good evening, everybody, and thank you for sharing with us this webinar. I am, as Louise said, the head of the Jewish Community in Egypt and the head of Drop of Milk also. Drop of Milk is in French [foreign] Le Goutte de Lait. It was established in the '20s of the past century. Its main objective was to take care of the needy Jews, orphaned and needy Jews, but as the Jewish community is shrinking and this association is still in-force and within the norms required by the government, we added a new aim of this association: the preservation of the Jewish heritage. This was due to the growing interest of the youth in Egypt with the Egyptian-Jewish history and Egyptian-Jewish heritage and their eagerness to preserve it. We have been working with ARCE. It's not the first time. Three years ago, we did research on the 12 remaining synagogues in Egypt. The comprehensive research from the historical point of view, architectural with drawings, photographs, and now, we are looking on the Bassatine Cemetery, which is very important because it is considered the second oldest Jewish cemetery in the world after Mount of Olives. I would like to thank the US Embassy and the ARCE for the continuous support to the preservation of the Egyptian-Jewish heritage. Thank you very much.

Louise Bertini:

Thank you, Magda. Our next speaker is Eli Eltachan, who has been leader of the Karaite community for the last 10 years and has served as the president of Universal Karaites since November 2019. So I now would like to welcome Eli.

Eli Eltachan:

Thank you very much. Dear Zoom meeting participants, I am honored to represent the Karaite community at this important meeting, and along with my counterpart David Ovadia ... sorry. Sorry again ... the president of Karaite Jews of American, to acknowledge the momentous commitment made by the US Ambassador to Egypt, Mr. Jonathan Cohen, to our ... the preservation and protection of the historical Bassatine Cemetery in Cairo, which holds such significance of our heritage and our people. This commitment made in collaboration with the Drop of Milk Foundation and the American Research Center in Egypt has special meaning for me, as my parents were born in Egypt, and for David, who was born in Cairo and left as a 12-year-old to the United States with his family in 1962. And for other Karaite communities in Turkey, Poland, Suisse, France and others. Unfortunately, little remain of Bassatine. Founded in the 9th century of an 84 [Indistinct] of desert land that included equal element for both Rabbinical and Karaite individuals. Now, only four tombs remain, a small but meaningful reminder of the generation of good people who lived there. Ours was community that contributed to Egypt society, prayed with each other and lived in harmony with our Muslim and Christian neighbors, and of course, with other demonstration with the Jewish community including the Rabbinic Jewish. Today, the Jewish community in Egypt is reduced to literally a small handful of people. A few ancient site and archives does remain as bittersweet demonstrate to the Levant and other active community that live in Cairo over a thousand years. But now, we are in the beginning of campaign to save and perhaps restore those vestiges of our dynamic Rabbinic and Karaite Jewish communities in Egypt. To celebrate their contribution towards [Indistinct] and for the cultural heritage for us all. At the beginning of the year, we had a planned to send a delegation to Cairo to visit and see close-up the restoration project, but those plan were put on hold due the COVID-19 pandemic. David and I hope that we can visit soon to collaborate, celebrate and to exchange knowledge and ideas

in order to promote these and future projects. In conclusion, I want to take this opportunity again to thank Ambassador Cohen and his staff, Magda and the president of the Jewish Community in Cairo, Professional Yoram Meital from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and Samy Ibrahim, director of the Drop of Milk Foundation. They have each done so much along with others to build momentum for this project, ensuring that our legacy can continue for the future generation. In the end, [foreign]. Thank you and looking forward to [Indistinct] ahead. Thank you very much.

Louise Bertini:

Thank you very much. Our next speaker is Dr. Yoram Meital, and I hope we can get his picture working. Yoram is a professor of Middle East studies and the head of the Chaim Herzog Center from Middle East Studies and Diplomacy at Ben-Gurion University. His research focuses on the political, social, cultural and economic developments in Middle Eastern societies. Dr. Meital holds a PhD from Haifa University and has held teaching and research positions in Harvard Law School, Skidmore College, Northeastern University, Oxford University and University of Pennsylvania. Welcome, Dr. Yoram, and I hope we can get your picture up.

Yoram Meital:

Okay. Thank you, Louise. I'm getting a message on my screen saying that you cannot start your video because the host has disabled it. So if you can ask ... the host has asked to ... okay. I hope how you will be able to see me.

Louise Bertini:

Yes, now we can see you. We can see now.

Yoram Meital:

Okay. Thank you, my host and thanks ... Oh, oh, can you hear me? Can you see me? Hello?

Eli Eltchan:

Yes, Yoram. Yes.

Yoram Meital:

Oh, can I go ahead?

Louise Bertini:

Go ahead and share your screen.

Yoram Meital:

Okay. So thank you so much for this very nice introduction and for the opportunity to share with you a very brief presentation about the Karaite community in Egypt, or mainly what used to be the Karaite community because currently, no Karaite Jews left in the country. Like their brothers, the Rabbinic Jews, most of the almost 5,000 Karaites left Egypt in the early 1960s. Yet two Karaite synagogues and two graveyards still stand in Cairo, and today, they are part of the Jewish community project of safeguarding Jewish heritage in Egypt. Now, in the last 4 years, the Jewish community in Cairo led by our dear friend and leader, Magda Haroun, are promoting an unprecedented project of preserving the local Jewish heritage, including the Karaite synagogue, a Karaite library and the two graveyards that are the focus of today's event. Now, my presentation very briefly introduces the Karaite community that prospered in Egypt and highlight the current effort to safeguarding its heritage. As it is well known, the Karaite differed from their Rabbinic Jewish brethren in all that concerns the approach to religion, customs and tradition. For the Rabbinic, the Talmud and the Jewish Oral Law, as it had been developed since the Mishnah, the Talmud era, are the base that observant Jews must follow strictly. The Karaite, on the other hand, speak to the Holy Written Torah, the first five books of the Bible, and oppose the central importance that was given by the Orthodox Jews to the Oral Law based on the Talmud. Now, the Karaite rituals and pray, including the prayer book, the Passover Haggadah are also different. The Karaite do not, for instance, blow the shofar on Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah. They do not celebrate ... they used not to celebrate Hanukkah, for instance. They do not put on the tefillin as the Rabbinic do, and they outright reject the mystical literature of the Rabbinics. The Karaite prays twice a day. You can see here the old Karaite synagogue on the Jewish quarter, which I will introduce very soon. Prayer is performed, as you can see here, when the worshippers stand or sit on the carpet. Ritual cleanliness before prayer and bending down with the face touching the ground during the prayer looks

quite similar to the Muslim practice of praying. However, it is important to note that these rituals originate from the Biblical text and not from adopting any other religious customs or traditions. The fundamental difference that separates Karaite and Rabbinic led to tension between these two communities and sometimes even to fierce struggles and even boycotts. In the last decades of the 19th century, there was a significant change in the Ottoman Empire, of which Egypt was a part. Among other things, there has been a significant change in the civil and legal status of non-Muslims' communities, including the Jewish community. With the local Egyptian government's permission, each of the Rabbinic and the Karaite congregations established its own distinct community and religious institutions. In general, the relationship between the two communities became closer. Until the beginning of the 20th century, nearly all Cairoan Jewry resided in Cairo's Zuweila quarter, which was consequently dubbed, "The Neighborhood of the Jews," Haret el-Yahud. In 1917, Haret el-Yahud was still home to a large number of Jewish families, over 5,379 of which about a quarter were Karaites who comprised the Jewish community in this neighborhood, comprised 91 percent of its population. The Karaite Jews inhabited the northern part of the neighborhood. You can see this in the map over here. In black is the site of the Karaite Dar Simcha Historical Synagogue, which still exists. This renowned synagogue, Dar Simcha, was also nearby the office of the Hakham Akbar, the chief Rabbi of the Karaite, very close to the communal council and [Indistinct], which was responsible for all the administrative, religious and judicial matters of the community and also to the communal code that operated, again, in this neighborhood or this northern part of the Jewish quarter was named Haret el-Yahud al-Qarain, the quarter of the Karaite Jews. And the rest of this neighborhood was occupied, as mentioned, by Rabbinic Jews, both Sephardic and some even Ashkenazi Jews. Significant economic, social and cultural transformation was evident in the turn of the 20th century. The Jewish quarter that had existed for hundreds of years gradually emptied of its original inhabitants. Many Jewish families moved to new neighborhoods according to their financial ability. Most of the Karaite Jews who left the neighborhood settled in El-Abaseya, a [Indistinct] neighborhood, a kind of middle-class neighborhood at the beginning of the 20th century. Yet several well-to-do families, Karaite families, settled in Heliopolis and center of Cairo. Those Rabbinic and Karaite Jews who remained in Haret el-

Yahud belonged mainly to the lower socioeconomic strata of Egyptian-Jewish society. The overall feeling, and this is very important, I feel, that in the last quarter of the 19th century, the three or even four decades of the 20th century, the first decades of the 20th century, the overall feeling within the Jewish community, including the Karaite community, was one of peace and prosperity and security and stability. The community's affluence was well-reflected in the services that were provided especially to the needy families. Members of the community made sure to pay their membership fees as well for other services, including burial fees in Bassatine. And I will expand on this in a minute. Wealthy members funded communal aid and educational projects and well-to-do Jews provided funding for building the new synagogue in El-Abaseya. This is the old synagogue in the Jewish quarter. This is the new synagogue that was inaugurated in the year 1933. We can see the exterior, very impressive monument and building and the interior. Also, we can see here a family graveyard, which we'll elaborate later on this Zoom event. Talking about distinguished Karaite, we cannot skip the centrality, the importance and the influence of Mourad Farag, a renowned, maybe one of the most renowned and prolific Jewish intellectuals in the beginning of the 20th century. He composed over 30 books in various topics, and he was also highly, I would say, nationalist, Egyptian nationalist at the same time. Here, you can see ... I will not read it, but you can see in Arabic and in translation one of his most known poems, [foreign]. "My homeland is Egypt, she is my birthplace. In her was I brought up, and in her was I educated." And the last line, "May she live free, even though I have been enslaved." Farag's influence in the community was just one example. The other example that we should look into this evening is Daoud Hosni, who was born to a Karaite Jewish family in the neighborhood of the Karaite ... the old Karaite neighborhood, part of the Jewish quarter. He came from a lower-middle class family and had a profound impact on modern Egyptian-Arabic music. He composed over 500 songs, and he composed and wrote to the most known singers, including Umm Kulthum, including Leila Mourad and so many others. Talking about the Karaites, important to mention that as I already said, they strictly stick with the written holy text, the Bible, and their community for centuries kept some of the rare Biblical manuscripts that still exist. Today, they exist in so many parts of the world, but a significant corpus luckily was found about 2 years ago in Cairo. It is now part of safeguarding the Jewish heritage. Here, you can see a

photo from a story that ran by the New York Times in the beginning of 2020. Also, important to mention that talking about the community, just one example. You can see here Ketubah written in Hebrew, and the Karaite used Arabic and Hebrew, and unlike other Jewish communities that used a lot of French and sometimes Arabic and very rarely Hebrew or Yiddish. As for the Karaite, Arabic was the lingua franca, and in addition, holy text written in Hebrew. So the Ketubah is written in Hebrew, unlike a Rabbinic Ketubah, which is in Aramaic, as we well know and aware. Now, the Karaite, like the other Jews of course influenced by the political developments, national struggle in Egypt. This is part of the context. We don't have the time to go into details, but it is important to mention that even after the war in 1948, vast majority of the Karaite remained in Egypt. We have here a picture of a visit by Mohamed Naguib, the first president of the Republic of Egypt after the military coup of the Free Officers in July 1952. Just 3 months after the army took over, Naguib found the time to come to the Moshe Der'i Synagogue that you already saw a picture, and to congratulate and to bring his best wishes for the Karaite community. And he even left a message that you can see here in Arabic, just a brief translation. "I would like to emphasize that all of the children of Egypt are brothers, regardless of their religion or faith. There is no difference between Jews, Muslim or Christians. Religion is for God. The Nation is for all." This had not prevented, of course, the development of the 1950s, and like the other Jewish who lived in Egypt, 1956 was a watershed event. The war, the Suez War and after the Suez War, the beginning of the 1960s, the Jewish community emptied most of ... the vast majority left in the years between 1956 and 1961, '62. To run very fast, Dr. Louise already mentioned the grant from ARCE to the community to document synagogues, and in fact the history of what's left, items that's relevant to history, and this project is still going on. Documentation of a Cairo synagogue and even restoration and in part reuse several synagogue. Running very fast to Bassatine, to the cemetery, I would just mention briefly that the Rabbinic and Karaite communities owned large plots in the old Jewish cemetery in Bassatine for at least 1,000 years. These large graveyards used as a Jewish cemetery for centuries. It goes back well to the medieval era. Families of wealthy Rabbinic and Karaite owned family graveyards in Bassatine, which they purchased from their own community. The graveyards of the Menasha and Lichaa families, whose comprehensive restoration we celebrate today, is a

case in point. Now, what we see here is part of a document written in Arabic from the year 1571. The document states that the Karaite community of Egypt had this land in Bassatine al-Wazir in the area of Bassatine since very long ago. And it was in their hands on the basis of an older document. This was given, of course, in the beginning of the Ottoman rule in Egypt. Now, allow me to conclude by pointing two key issues that I think correspond also with the very interesting, although brief, words by Ambassador Cohen at the beginning of this event. While no Karaite Jew left in Egypt and only a few Karaite sites remained in Cairo, studying the rich architecture provides or can shed light on the unique congregation that established and used them. Studying the interior and exterior design of Karaite synagogues or cemeteries, the items and symbols that were integrated into them contained rich information about the cultural affiliation of these native Egyptian Jews, their ritual and habits. Hence, also the enormous importance that should be attributed to the preservation of the last Jewish sites left in Egypt. Since 2016, Ms. Magda Haroun, president of the Jewish Community in Cairo, has been leading an unprecedented effort for the preservation of Jewish heritage in Egypt without distinction between Rabbinic and Karaites or Sephardic and Ashkenazi. According to her farsighted vision, these Egyptian Jewish sites should be seen as an Egyptian cultural sites, an issue we have discussed in previous Zoom events, which are available in YouTube now. Jews have been an integral part of Egyptian society for over 2,000 years. The Karaite congregation has existed in Egypt since at least the 9th century. Preservation of Jewish synagogues and cemeteries is an act of safeguarding an important piece of the rich historical and cultural mosaic, which Egyptian society has been composed for many centuries. What I would like to reiterate in closing is that restoration of communal prayer houses and cemeteries provide significant knowledge not only about the past, but also about the present. Obviously, safeguarding of Jewish sites in Egypt provides valuable knowledge about the communal, social, economic and cultural stratification of the Jewish communities that use them. One implicit aspect of safeguarding Jewish sites is that this act inspire public debate about religious tolerance and political pluralism in Egypt today. The fierce debate in all media outlets on the issue includes views about the disappearance not only of the Jews, but also of minorities at large, and which in essence reflects on the past image of Egyptian society, culture and political order. A

seemingly minor issue for renovation of synagogue or family graveyards in Cairo is in fact, I would argue, indicative of much deeper and broader processes that Egyptian society is undergoing today. Thank you.

Louise Bertini:

Thank you so much. I'm now going to share my screen. So now, I'm going to turn the topic to the work that has been done under the US Ambassadors Fund grant for the preservation and documentation of the cemetery in Bassatine. Our project has involved both the creation of a heritage management plan for the remaining areas of the cemetery, as well as a pilot conservation project on the two burial grounds belonging to the Menasha and Lichaa families who were prominent members of Egypt's community of Karaite Jews. Tradition accords the foundation of the Jewish cemetery at Bassatine with the rule of Ahmad ibn Tulun in Egypt in the 9th century. The earliest documentary proof of this usage, however, comes to use through an Ottoman court document dating to 1649 that reaffirms the right of Jews to bury their dead at Bassatine. This was established by Mamluk Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay in the late 15th century. This valuable historical text has now been translated into English. The area once occupied by the Bassatine Jewish Cemetery lies to the south of the biggest Muslim cemetery of Cairo, a quarter of which appears on this map in the upper left-hand corner, and immediately south of a small Baha'i Cemetery. The cemetery was very extensive, at least 2 kilometers by half a kilometer at the beginning of the 20th century. Since the migration of the Jewish community from Egypt in the mid-20th century, however, the maintenance of the cemetery has presented numerous challenges. Informal encroachment in the form of new buildings and waste dumping together with widespread vandalism, including the theft of marble grave markers, were rife. In the 1990s, a major elevated road artery, the first Cairo Ring Road, severed the site in two. Our legacy now consists of two significant components. The first is a large single cemetery immediately to the north and under the Ring Road, which contains up to seven layers of burials in an area of approximately 5 hectares. These are mostly simple tombs dating to the last century marked by blocks of limestone, sometimes located within defined family enclosures. There are also monumental structures here in the form of miniature ancient Egyptian temples. The second component of the cemetery lies to the south of the Ring Road. This is a cluster of smaller

walled enclosures, containing the graves of many of Cairo's elite Jewish families of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as the burial of Rav Haim Capusi, a charismatic spiritual leader of the 17th century. The architectural styles used in the building of these memorials to Jewish dead are amazingly diverse. Classical, almost Baroque, details can be seen in the Capusi Cemetery, which contains a dense cluster of 85 individual interments around the focus of the Rabbi's grave. The Cattai family mausoleum by contrast lies under a single huge masonry dome, numerous Neo-Fatimid architectural references. And the Mosseri family graveyard contains monuments that recall the sleek lines of 1930s Art Deco structures and the Modern movement in architecture executed in reinforced concrete. All of the individual sites I have mentioned thus far are being documented as part of this AFCP collaboration. But the work has gone a step further at the Karaite graveyards of the Menasha and Lichaa families. These were chosen sites for implementing a pilot conservation project. They were chosen because of the relative ease of access and relative simplicity in terms of execution. The two enclosures are of similar size, about 460 square meters, and are surrounded by walls. They each have one room for family gatherings to commemorate the dead, located on the street side in the corners, and the Menasha graveyard additionally has a domed mausoleum. The graveyards presented a number of conservation challenges. They included removal of numerous unoccupied squatter buildings on-site before work can start. Another priority was the repair and cleaning of damaged limestone masonry elements, including the dome, as well as gathering of the repair of damaged and leaking roofs over the gathering rooms. The replacement of missing masonry features, such as balustrades and decorative metalwork was carried out using historical imagery as a guide where original features were missing. And finally, there was the conservation work on the surviving inscribed marble and granite plaques and new tombstones. These include the provision of some new bases as well as more delicate operations on the marble plaques. I will show you just a few views of the completed conservation here, the result of a lot of hard work by our supervising architect, Mohamed Mokhtar, assisted by Ahmed Shafiq and conservators Khaled al-Sayed Afifi and Heba Chawky as well as other skilled workers on-site. Of course, more work remains to be done to capitalize on the investment made in the conservation of these graveyards and ensure continued sustainability. This

first image is the cemetery before work commenced, and this is a picture of when work was in progress. And then, this is now the product that is done as of now, in terms of being fully conserved. Here are some close-up images of the Menasha Mausoleum when we first arrived on site, and then now after conservation work was completed. And here is another photo of the Menasha gathering room before conservation and after. Here, we see a photo of the Lichaa graveyard from when we first arrived, including of course the squatter buildings as I mentioned earlier, and after conservation had been completed. With the help of Dr. Yoram, we are currently preparing bilingual illustrated visitor information panels that will be installed in the gathering rooms of the Menasha graveyard. These panels will include material on the Egyptian Karaite community, some of whom are seen in his photograph of a commemorative gathering in the 1940s. Before we conclude, I would like to touch briefly on the future pilot project carried out at the Lichaa and Menasha graveyards, as well as at the wider site. Having completed the conservation component of the project, we would now like to move forward on the implementation of hard and soft landscaping of the site to transform it into a controlled garden setting that is appropriate for such a meditative context. It is also quite appropriate, given the name of the area, Bassatine, is the Arabic word for gardens. Stone paving will allow for circulation around the graves and the planting of palm and olive trees, both of which have strong symbolism, will create shade. The cost of this operation will have to be met through private donations. A further development of the site is possible, and that is to create a viable community center on the empty plot of land between the two family graveyards. A conceptual design for such a center has been prepared by ARCE in consultation with the Drop of Milk Association, which is what you see here. The concept links the graveyards and creates a single point of access from the street. In addition to facilities such as toilets, this design includes a 55-square-meter multipurpose hall at a ground level and a shaded open cafe on the first floor with a view over the graveyards and the street. This hall could host permanent or temporary exhibitions, film screenings or other appropriate public events. It should be noted that the site of all the Bassatine Cemetery has easy access to parking and is further close to the residential district of Maadi. Whether this concept is adopted for implementation or not is dependent on the wishes of the Jewish community and the level of interest of potential donors. It also ties with

another important component of the project we are currently finalizing: a heritage management plan. It is clear that the scattered remnants of Bassatine Cemetery represent a unique challenge that necessitates the development of a management framework. We must explore how to ensure their continued existence and communicate their value. Time has shown that graveyards are faced with a number of obstacles, chiefly from urban encroachment. In order to offset these risks, there must be an implementable vision for how these graveyards will be used or reused. Such a vision must include how they might benefit their immediate and wider communities. How will we spread awareness and communicate an understanding of the historical and social significance and place within Cairo's history? We also hope that a proposed plan will offer function as a springboard for future funding and our grant proposals to continue conservation work on the tangible heritage of the Egyptian Jewish community, much of its diaspora that remains represented in the cemetery at Bassatine. I want to thank you for attention, and now we are going to open the floor for questions. We're going to pull up ... if you do have a question, you can please put it in the ... I want to direct you to the question and answer button. And I guess, Yoram and maybe Magda, you can turn your cameras on because some of these questions I believe will be directed to some of you. Our first question ...

Yoram Meital:

Could you ask the host to open the video again?

Louise Bertini:

That can be ... there you are.

Yoram Meital:

Okay.

Louise Bertini:

Our first question is from Edith, and it is for Yoram. And she is asking about, I guess, the picture in the synagogue why some people are kneeling. I believe that is in reference to one of the pictures that you had in your presentation.

Yoram Meital:

Yeah. Well, as I ... Can I answer this or do you want to collect questions?

Louise Bertini:

Yes. I'm asking the questions. Yeah, so our first question was about why people were kneeling in the photo in the synagogue?

Yoram Meital:

Okay. As I mentioned, the Karaite strictly obey the written holy text literally. So they use, for instance, this very famous verse in the Bible, in which Moses for the first time met God, and he heard his voice saying, "Take off your shoes, kneel and listen." This is the reason why the prayer performed when worshippers stand or sit on the carpet. And this is the reason why they take off their shoes before they get into praying hall. And this is also the reason why they're bending down with their face touching the ground. This is all based on verses from the Torah or the Bible, and they totally reject other interpretations that came later as oral traditions adopted by Orthodox Jews.

Louise Bertini:

Thank you. I have another question, which actually I can answer this one. It's from David in San Francisco, who is wondering about how to be more involved. You can, of course, visit our website, arce.org, and under Support Our Work, you can click make a donation. And of course, any contributions are welcome. The next question is from Erica, and this is for Yoram, and it says, "I've noticed interesting symbols and designs on buildings in the Karaite section of Harat al-Yahud. Where can I learn more about these architectural designs and also, have you been able to go inside the old Karaite synagogue in Harat al-Yahud?"

Yoram Meital:

Okay. So these are two questions. The first one is a fascinating observation that any of us who visit synagogues either in Old Jewish Quarter or even downtown Cairo in Abbassia, or even in Ben-Ezra, the genizah famous synagogue. You can see the influence of local architectural design symbolism that are being adopted by the local Jewish communities. This has to do explicitly with the notion that Jews were an integral part of the

local culture. This is very true for the Karaite congregation. This congregation not only mainly spoke in Arabic, almost all the accounts that we had by visitors, writers to Cairo tells us something about this congregation. They say they look like the Arabs, the local Arabs. They dress the same. They speak the same. They behave in a very similar manner, and they are Jews. So yes, they were Jews ...

Eli Eltchan:

Yoram, you add that the name, the name is very close to the Arabic. Some of the names are very close.

Yoram Meital:

And they adopted Arabic names, absolutely. Right. So yes, in a nutshell, I would say we are talking about a very native, Egyptian-Jewish community. And this reflects in their own synagogues. Of course, they preserved and kept some of the obvious characteristics of any synagogue. So the oracle, the [foreign], will be facing the east. And of course, the Holy Bible is the center of everything. Did we visit all the synagogues? So vast majority of the synagogues have been visited regularly and documented very carefully by us, this group that worked since 2017 on this project. It's a very comprehensive documentation and this part of a vision that we have that one day, Jewish Heritage Library will be open in Cairo, and it will include and compose all this rich documentation that was found in Karaites and Rabbinic, Sephardic or Ashkenazi synagogues and other Jewish sites.

Louise Bertini:

Thanks. We have another question asking about if there any plans for virtual tours of the refurbished cemetery space, and I can actually say yes, there are. And just today, we started 3D scanning of the site, and we are hoping to at least finish the Karaite cemetery to which we just presented. We're hoping to finish scanning that tomorrow. So within the next few months, you can keep an eye out on our website and social media, to which, we will be sharing the virtual tour. We have another question from Melissa, and, Yoram, I believe this is for you. "Could you address the connections between the Jewish communities of Cairo and Alexandria, differences in building and monument styles and the state of preservation?"

Yoram Meital:

Right. So, now we talk about a sensitive issue, and this sensitivity goes back to history. For hundreds of years, you have two Jewish communities running Alexandria in the north, other the second in Cairo. Cairo is the capital city. It was the large community in terms of numbers, and for many ... the tradition was that the Chief Rabbi Office is based in Cairo. Saying that, the two communities in the modern era have been developed in a very different kind of manner between a much more close to Egyptian capture in society in Cairo and kind of cosmopolitan or more cosmopolitanism in Alexandria of the first decade, two or three decades of the 20th century. This is not to say that Cairo was not cosmopolitan in the center or some of the neighborhood, to say that the two communities develop in a kind of different approach. If we are to compare, for instance, the cemeteries in Alexandria to the cemeteries in Bassatine, we can notice differences, but in other terms, these are similar two communities with different institutions and it goes back, as I said, to the late 19th century, beginning of the 20th century while the Alexandria Jewish community had kind of autonomous status, and Cairo remained the same for the Jewish community in Cairo.

Louise Bertini:

Thanks. We have another question ...

Eli Eltchan:

Is it possible to give me the option to open the camera because I see that a lot of [Indistinct] asking to see who is Eli, so I would be happy if you can turn my camera on.

Louise Bertini:

I hope we can get that fixed. There you are.

Eli Eltchan:

Ah, because I see in the remarks that some people are asking, "Who is Eli? We cannot see his picture." So now, you can see me live. Sorry I didn't take an attention to these remarks during my speech, so sorry for that now. You can see me. I see that you're not disappointed from my picture.

Louise Bertini:

We have another question from Gwen, who is asking about, "Were records maintained of the buildings that had to be taken down?" And the answer is yes. We did have very thorough documentation that took place from before any work started. And we had reportings on a daily basis during the work, as well as our final reporting and now, of course, the final virtual documentation as well. So that is thoroughly documented. A question from Jerry, asking about the inscriptions on the graves preserved in the Karaite area. So for the cemetery, yes, they are preserved. And if you are asking about more details about what they are, what saying, that I will defer to Yoram to answer.

Yoram Meital:

Well, first, very interesting to see that the writing on the gravestones are in Hebrew and Arabic mainly, sometimes in French. The ritual of the burial is quite similar to what you find with Orthodox Jews, including the directions to Jerusalem, some of the prayers are different. Talking just about the text, so very interesting to note here is that until the modern era ... let's say in Egypt, the second half of the 19th century, okay? Until this time, Karaite used to bury their dead in a very simple manner. Just have you dig this hole in the ground, you put the deceased, you cover it with a minimal, minimal stone written about some very minimalistic text about he or she who buried in there. In the modern time, the influence came to the community, in addition, in the graveyards. And for the first time, we found French text on graves and in addition, we have seen this glorious kind of monument of both with the dome that Louise presented so beautifully. We have seen this monumental kind of cover above. This is very modern, I would say. Up until the middle of the 19th century, it was not existent at all.

Louise Bertini:

Thanks. The next question is from Arlene, asking about the total cemetery of the Karaites. So the larger cemetery was around 8 hectares ... sorry, around 5 hectares that at least remains today. But the Karaite cemetery is considerably smaller. It's only about 460 square meters for each of the Karaite and the Lichaa lot. Another question ...

[Chatter]

Louise

Bertini: sorry.

Yoram Meital:

It is important to add to this, Louise, we have Ottoman and before deeds about Bassatine, and we definitely know that the scope of this Jewish cemetery both Rabbinic and Karaite was vast, very big. At least 150 hectares at the Ottoman times. So what you see today in the landscape all around the Menasha and Lichaa graveyards, all these buildings were part, unfortunately, of the Bassatine Cemetery.

Louise Bertini:

We have another actually quite increasing question from Robert. "How does the cemetery relate to the Cairo Genizah in efforts to manage the documents there? Is it possible that there are awesome documents in the cemetery which can be recovered for possible study?" Yoram, I will defer that to you.

Yoram Meital:

Yeah. Well, first, I belong to those one who believe that Genizah might be found in Egypt even today. We don't know exactly where. I would not be surprised. Egypt is the land of surprises. It can happen to use, and I hope it will happen. Unlike the famous Genizah, I'm certain that this time, the Genizah will be kept in Egypt, as the vision of the group that worked in Egypt ... everything that we found and documented will be kept in Egypt, and it will be kept in Egypt and kept by Egyptians for the future. This is part of this vision. It is far-sighted, I would say, if I may, but we believe in this. And Magda, our leader, strictly taking this route. So yes, Genizah and cemeteries goes hand by hand, as we can say. The famous Genizah was found mostly in Ben-Ezra Synagogue, but also in the Mosseri graveyards, the family graveyards in the Mosseri that was mentioned by Dr. Louise and also, in the Bassatine Rabbinic Cemetery, there was a section for Genizah and the famous Cairo Genizah [Indistinct] was taken in the end of the 19th century from this site. The Ben-Ezra Synagogue, the Bassatine Cemetery and from the Mosseri family plot or graveyard.

Louise Bertini:

Thanks. Magda, I think we now have a question for you, and it's actually there's two questions which are related. One is from Khalid, who's asking about, "Are there any other important Jewish cemeteries in Egypt?" And from Roger, "Are there plans to secure and preserve the larger cemetery of Bassatine?"

Magda Haroun:

Well, technically, in each of the [Indistinct], there was a cemetery. And in [Indistinct], there was a cemetery. In Alexandria, the cemetery is still there. It exists. It's well-preserved because it's in the middle of the town near the Catholic cemetery, the Latin cemetery. So it's well-preserved. In [Indistinct], they don't exist anymore. In Malhalla El Kubra, they don't exist anymore. In Mansoura, they don't exist anymore unfortunately. The only remaining cemeteries are the Bassatine Cemetery and Alexandria Cemetery. As for the preservation of the main cemetery, on the other side of the Ring Road, this is the task of the Drop of Milk. Now, the ARCE is aiming in restoration of the main cemeteries. The Capusi, the Cattai which are still of interest from the architectural point of view, and the work on securing and preservation of the main cemetery is going on. There is an extension of the Ring Road is that going to be built, and the government is very keen on preserving the cemeteries, the tombs which are already there. We're working very closely with Rabbis and to be sure the builders that will be supported the enlargement Ring Road will be done according to the Jewish law, that we not damage the tombs. And we have been promised that this area will be clean and planted, and it will reflect a good image of Egypt.

Louise Bertini:

And actually, a similar question also for Magda. "Are there plans to open the cemeteries for visitors?" And I would say yes, but I will let you add to that.

Magda Haroun:

Yes, of course, they will be open, and they are open for Egyptian [Indistinct] groups. They are open, but by appointment, as well as the synagogues also. They are open by appointment.

Louise Bertini:

Great. We have a question from Joshua. "Are there any sources written by Jewish residents under the Ottoman-Egyptian rule during or prior to the 19th century that described Jewish life in the region at the time?"

Magda Haroun:

Of course.

Yoram Meital:

Yes.

Magda Haroun:

Of course. The Genizah. The Genizah. The Genizah, which is considered to be the medieval Facebook of Egypt, but we don't have it. It's scattered all over the world. We don't have any documents that can be consulted on the Internet.

Yoram Meital:

I can add to this that taking into account that the Ottoman Empire was highly bureaucratized. This is a very effective system of ruling and bureaucracy. And thanks to this, anyone who can read Ottoman Turkish and visit Ottoman archives can find tons of documentation about the province of Egypt, which was part of the Ottoman Empire, this expanded empire. And in addition to this, because of the centrality of Egypt, which is still central in our times, but it is for hundreds of years ... we have a lot of documentation by travelers, diplomats and even by Rabbis who crossed and came from Palestine to Egypt, settled or temporarily settled in Egypt and left a lot of documentation about the country. Talking about the Genizah, so a small episode will give you a hint about it. So about 25 years before Schechter found the Genizah, a Rabbi from Jerusalem visited Cairo, and he got the permission to go to the Genizah chamber. He worked in this chamber for two full days, and he left an account two volumes by Rabbi Yaakov Sapir. This is the 1860s, 1870s, and he concluded by saying the following, "I've been working for two days. After they allowed me to go on the ladder to this chamber, and only after I showed them that I have a small mezuzah for blessing, to protect me from bad things. I worked there for two days and you know what, this is just rubbish. There is nothing in there. It's

not a true Genizah. There is no importance, documents that I found. This is just talk by people." Of course, he missed the target and 25 years after that, the Genizah was found.

Eli Eltachan:

Yoram, as I know the Ben-Ezra Synagogue and the Genizah is a Karaite synagogue in the beginning, and you have to mention it your speech as well.

Yoram Meital:

No, but I'm mentioning all the historical facts, my dear friend Eli.

Eli Eltachan:

I know that it's for sure been a Karaite synagogue.

Yoram Meital:

I know the Karaite claimed for the Ben-Ezra Synagogue. Unfortunately, this is mostly likely not historical based.

Eli Eltachan:

Okay.

Louise Bertini:

We have a question from Hannah for Magda. "Is there a future for a Jewish community center in Cairo?"

Magda Haroun:

Is there a future for the Jewish community in Cairo?

Louise Bertini:

I'm guessing they want a facility is what I'm guessing.

Magda Haroun:

The past is the future. The past of the Jewish community is the future of the Jewish community. The Jewish community is still there, and as long as it exists, it will maintain and preserve the heritage. And afterwards, the Drop of Milk will continue the work. So we are not worried.

Louise Bertini:

We have another interesting question from Onaya. "Are the cemeteries protected by any Egyptian law today, and who legally owns the site, but there are no representatives of the ... there are representatives of the community here." So Magda, I will let you take that.

Magda Haroun:

Well, the cemetery in Cairo is not protected by the Antiquities as we tried several times to get them under the protection of the antiquities. But due to their state, they did not qualify to be protected by the antiquities. Actually, the land is owned by the Jewish community, since [Indistinct] and furthermore, and we have the land, the deed of the land, the original one. We're having it, and what was the rest of the ... there is a Jewish community, small, but there is.

Louise Bertini:

And we hope to have another one that we're trying to have at the site as well because I have seen actually a lot of other questions asking about visiting the site, and is it open, and there is a question I'm looking at right now. "Are Egyptians allowed to enter the sites?" So, Magda, I'll let you take that.

Magda Haroun:

Well in fact, most of the members of the Drop of Milk, they're all Egyptians. They are, not most of them. All of them are Egyptian, and I'm the only Jewish member. They're all Muslims and Christians. As I'm the only active person in the Jewish community. We intend to open the membership of the Drop of Milk for people who can donate for their time and effort for the preservation of this heritage.

Louise Bertini:

We have a question from Peter. "Were Rabbinic Jews buried in the same cemeteries as Karaites? My grandfather was a physician at the Jewish Hospital in Cairo. When he died in 1952, he was buried in Cairo. Does the structure of the Jewish Hospital still exist and how can I find his burial site?"

Magda Haroun:

Well, the hospital exists. It's a military hospital today. No, the Karaites had their own cemeteries, and the Rabbinic had their own cemetery. He might be buried in the cemetery in Bassatine, in the big one, but unfortunately, a lot of the tombstones have been stolen or broken. So definitely if he's buried in Bassatine, he's there. Finding the burial site, it's going to be a little problematic.

Yoram Meital:

But maybe he can send us the full name of his father, and maybe luckily, using the list of very ... there are several dozens with inscriptions. Who knows, so send us the full name. We will try to see if he's one of those still left.

Louise Bertini:

I will just note, we have a lot of questions. We're only going to take questions for another maybe five minutes or so. So if we do not get to your question, I believe you can e-mail info at arce.org, I believe the e-mail for Drop of Milk is admin@dropofmilkeg.com. But we will take a few more questions. We have a question on, "I know there are disputes regarding the property of most of the Jewish places. What is the plan to maintain these places while there is no access to them?" Magda, I'll let you take that.

Magda Haroun:

Well, I don't know what kind of disputes are regarding the property for most of the Jewish places. The synagogues are the ownership of the ... are owned by the Jewish community, and the plan is to maintain. We are maintaining the synagogues. We want to open them to have cultural activities. We plan to do it and use them as cultural hubs in the near future.

Louise Bertini:

We have another question from Rebecca, and her question is about the Karaite relationship to the Bassatine cemetery. "It seems according to the document that Yoram showed, the Bassatine has the longest link to the Karaites, but over time, it has become more associated with Rabbinites. Is that true, and how did that happen?"

Yoram Meital:

Allow me to clarify a bit about this. So the large area of Bassatine for many centuries, we have documents about two main plots separated between Rabbinic and the Karaite section. So as Magda already mentioned, the Karaite buried their dead in the Karaites section, with is the modern part of this plot and the Rabbinic in their own graveyards. So, I think that this rule kept for hundreds of years. I can say something that is anecdotal, but it tells you something about the current situation. So when the last Karaite Jewish woman passed away, she was buried in the Rabbinic cemetery, and her grave is still there marked. We do have periods of tension between these two communities, especially during the high time of medieval period about some disputed areas in the border between these two cemeteries, but usually, they were solved in a very peaceful manner.

Louise Bertini:

The next question for Yoram. They're asking about the main tension between the Karaites and the Rabbinites.

Yoram Meital:

Well, as I mentioned in the very beginning of my presentation, Karaite differed from the Rabbinic Jewish brethren in all that concerned the approach to religion, customs and traditions. There are so many different acts and rituals between these two. Let me give you just one example, symbolically. So the Karaite calendar, the very calendar is different from that of the one used by the Rabbinic, so often Jewish holidays are celebrated at different times among the two communities. So you can find evidences that the holiday of Shavuot last year was celebrated by the Jewish Rabbinic on Thursday and Friday, and the Karaites celebrated the same year on Sunday and Monday, so you see, they use a different calendar. Again, it comes from the way that the Karaite use the calendar for announcing the beginning of the months, which is different from the way that it is taken by the Rabbinic.

Louise Bertini:

Thanks ...

Eli Eltachan:

I think in this issue the Muslims and the Karaite, very close opinion about their months ...

Yoram Meital:

Yes, right.

Eli Eltachan:

... how they calculate the starting of their months.

Yoram Meital:

True, true.

Louise Bertini:

I think we'll take this question from ...

Eli Eltachan:

We are not ... I can say that I've not changed the calendar, have not played with the dates. Sorry for that. You can go ahead.

Louise Bertini:

I think we'll have this as the last question from Lemiece, and this is for Magda. "What are your plans to keep the belongs of Egyptian-Jewish community safe and preserved? Are there any plans for a museum, and do you have a link for the virtual visit?" That I can answer on the virtual visit. That will be available soon. So, Magda, I'll let you talk about the museum, and presentation.

Magda Haroun:

Well, first of all, for the preservation of Jewish belongings or artifacts, we made with the Minister of Antiquities a survey of all what is in the 12 synagogues, Torah scrolls, silver artifacts, carpets, chandeliers, everything is documented so to be sure that nothing will be stolen or smuggled out of Egypt. The museum, Inshallah, one day we will have a museum.

Louise Bertini:

So thank you, and apologies if we were not able to get to your questions. There has just been an overwhelming amount, and we're just trying to keep to time. I just want to thank everybody for joining us for today's lecture, and I hope you enjoyed our behind-the-scenes look at the conservation and of course Bassatine Cemetery's rich history, incredible significance and its current state. While we have made much strides in conservation work, there is still a lot of work that remains, and we do need your help to ensure the sustainable preservation of the site. We do have an immediate goal of trying to plant at least 30 trees in the Karaite Cemetery to provide some cover and shade, and it does cost \$100 to plant a tree, so if you would like to make a contribution for that, you can visit arce.org and click Donate. And I do, of course, encourage you to visit not only our website, and I believe the Drop of Milk has a Facebook page as well for more information. And I do know there are some members from ARCE with us today, so a special thanks and hello to those of you who have joined us, and if you're not a member, you can also click or visit our website, arce.org, and learn more about becoming a member. Our next lecture will actually be a member-only lecture on September 20th, and that will feature Dr. Jose Galan of the National Council of Scientific Research in Madrid, and his lecture is titled "A Middle Kingdom Funerary Garden in Thebes," and you do need to be a member to join that lecture, so sign up and you can join us for that. And just lastly, I just want to remind you, you can visit our website [arce.org\donate](http://arce.org/donate), and if you want to become a member, it's [arce.org\membership](http://arce.org/membership), so thank you all for joining us today. Thank you to all of our speakers ...

Magda Haroun:

Thank you.

Louise Bertini:

... and I hope you all have a good day. Thank you.

Yoram Meital:

Thank you, Louise.

Eli Eltchan:

Thank you very much. Thank you and great talk, great job.

Ambassador Cohen:

Thanks, good night.

Eli Eltchan:

Have a nice evening.

Magda Haroun:

[Indistinct].

Eli Eltchan:

Good night, Jonathan.