



Ari Synagogue

The ancient synagogues of Safed

Once the center of Jewish mysticism and Kabbala, the ancient city still emanates a spiritual aura

• TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ANN GOLDBERG

With its cobbled alleyways, narrow staircases, flowered courtyards and glorious view stretching out over the hills, much of the Old City of Safed seems untouched by time,

This is the same Safed which, stretching high up above its neighbors, played a vital role in announcing the date of Rosh

Chodesh – the new moon – every month by being part of a chain of beacons that could be seen for kilometers in all directions. It is the same Safed which, centuries ago, was the center of Jewish mysticism and Kabbala and, to this day, has an aura that inspires scholars and artists.

But Safed's glory is not just a thing of the past. The prayers that it has inspired and the books that were written there hun-

dreds of years ago are still sung and consulted regularly by Jews the world over.

The Ari, Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, is probably one of the most famous mystics associated with ancient Safed. He was the person who initiated the Kabbalat Shabbat service that precedes the evening service on Friday night. Dressed in white, he used to go out with his disciples to the edge of the town to greet the Shabbat with song and dance. They sang the Shabbat poem "Lecha Dodi," which was composed by his contemporary, Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz.

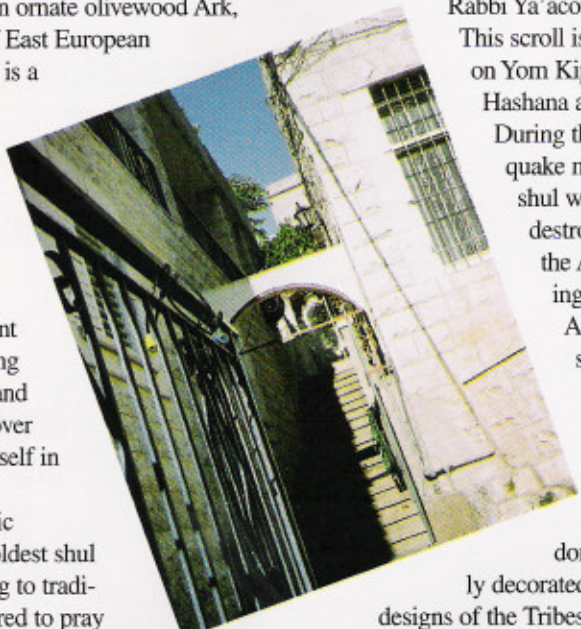
Two synagogues were built in the Ari's memory. The Ari Ashkenazi shul was built in the 16th century, on the spot that was the outermost limits of Safed 500 years ago and was probably where he stood to greet Shabbat every week. This shul, like many others, was destroyed in the earthquake of 1837. It was rebuilt about 20 years later. It has an ornate olivewood Ark, built in the style of East European synagogues. There is a bullet hole in the bima from a shell fired during the war in 1948. According to legend, the people inside the shul were at that moment bowing down during the Amida prayer and so the bullet flew over them and lodged itself in the bima.

The Ari Sephardic Synagogue is the oldest shul in Safed. According to tradition, the Ari preferred to pray there because the windows overlooked Mount Meron, the burial place of Shimon Bar-Yochai, the founder of the Kabbalist movement and author of the Zohar. The original building suffered damage during the earthquakes of 1759 and 1837. It is situated on the edge of the Jewish quarter, bordering on the Arab quarter and so during the War of

Independence it was of particular strategic importance. The Torah scrolls were removed and holes bored in the walls for surveillance and shooting.

The Abuhav Synagogue is named after the 15th-century sage from Toledo whose Sefer Torah was brought to Safed by his student, Rabbi Ya'acov Beirav.

This scroll is used only on Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashana and Shavuot. During the earthquake most of the shul was destroyed, but the Ark containing Rabbi Abuha's scroll remained standing. The inside of the dome is heavily decorated with



designs of the Tribes of Israel, crowns and musical instruments used in the Temple.

The Yossi Bana'a Synagogue is named after, and built next to, the grave of the Talmudic sage of the 3rd century. This shul is one of the most intricately decorated in Safed. On Lag Ba'Omer the Torah scroll, donated in the 19th century in memory of Rabbi Shmuel Abbo, is

taken to Mount Meron in the traditional procession.

The Yosef Caro Synagogue is named after the Kabbalist and author of the Shulchan Aruch, the last word on halachic rulings. He came to Safed in 1536 when he was 34 years old and was Safed's chief rabbi and head of the rabbinic court until his death at age 87. The area beneath the shul is where he lived and wrote his books. According to legend, he was visited by a *maggid*, an angel, who appeared to him regularly and revealed secrets of the Torah.

But with all the mystical charm of the ancient synagogues, a young visitor to Safed today would probably find his way on a Friday night to the Beirav shul. This synagogue was built after the great earthquake and was originally used as a study hall. It is named after Rabbi Ya'acov Beirav, who studied under Rabbi Yitzhak Abuhav and who tried to bring back rabbinical ordination in Safed. He counted among his pupils rabbis Yosef Caro and Moshe Cordovero. But the main reason it attracts hundreds of people from all over the world, with the crowds overflowing into the courtyards, is the Carlebach minyan. It was started several years ago by the Anglo-Saxon community in Safed. Every week their joyful prayers and melodies can be heard throughout the alleys and paths of the Old City, reminding the visitors of what Safed no doubt sounded like hundreds of years ago. ■



Yosef Caro Synagogue