Sephardic Customs and Jewish Religious Rituals and Festivals

In this chapter we gathered evidence of traditional customs from the Jewish community. Some of them are common to the ‘Sephardi’ Jewish culture and some are unique to the Jewish community of Izmir. We tried to understand the atmosphere surrounding those religious rituals and festivals, including traditional foods, objects, etc.

The “Kucharera”
The “Kucharera”, or “Tavola di Dolci” (Ladino), is a silver vessel for presenting sweets to welcome guests. The custom of presenting sweets to a guest is one of the characteristics of hospitality common to Christians and Jews in the Balkans and in the western territories of the Ottoman Empire, as Yohas indicates (Yohas, 1994). That custom is preserved by the Izmir Sephardi Jews with its typical set of vessels. This custom is not known among the Turks.

When a guest enters a Jewish house in Izmir, one of the girls, a bride or another woman enters carrying a “Tavola di Dolci” (a tray of sweets). The tray is usually made of silver and has an ornamented container at its center - “Kucharera” (from the word “kuchare” means spoon), with a place for hanging personal spoons and forks. On the tray there are two or more “palaticos” - small plates containing two kinds of marmalades and water glasses. The guest takes some of the sweets with the spoon or the fork. When one finishes eating, s/he places the spoon or fork in the center container, and then drinks the water. Later s/he is served Turkish coffee. The kind of sweets presented were usually fruit marmalade like “naranjes” - marmalade made of a kind of orange, “Kayisi” - apricot marmalade, “sharopi” – white sweets made of water with sugar, almonds and walnuts. At least two colors and flavors are usually served.

Yohas explains that when an Ashkenazi Jew, or others who were not acquainted with the custom, is invited to a Sephardi Jew, he would take the entire plate and eat all that it contained, not just a spoonful. By doing so, of course, he would make a fool of himself. Yohas thinks the origin of the custom is a need to express the joy over the visit by a guest. It seems that in ancient times it was connected to the customs of using sugar and sweets to attain good luck, to cure and to protect from the “evil eye.”

The Jews of Izmir perceive the “Tavola di Dolci” as one of the last remnants of their traditional culture. The set used to be a very important object, brought by the young bride from her father’s home. Due to the process of modernization during the second half of the 19th century, parts of the traditional customs changed or disappeared. Other parts continue to exist, but their reasons have changed. The serving of sweets existed until the mass immigration to Israel, and almost every family had its own set. Most of them sold their sets in Izmir before they immigrated to Israel. Today the “Tavola di Dolci” can still be found in many homes in Izmir, though it is not used frequently. It serves more as a decoration than as an everyday kitchen utensil.

During the 1980’s and the 1990’s the “Kucharera” became very popular wedding presents among Jews with roots in Izmir.
“Slichot” and Rosh Hashana
During the month of Elul, the Rabbi would pass among the Jews’ dwellings and knock on everyone's door at 2:30 a.m. The men would get up and go to the synagogue for “Slichot” (prayers asking God for forgive sins). When they returned home, they would eat "beurek" and "beurekas" made by the women.

Nadya Kaya told us about a custom in her childhood before Rosh Hashana (the festival marking the beginning of the New Year). Her father’s workers (about 10-15 workers) used to come with their children and greet their employer for the New Year. They brought sweets such as “mordos” – marzipan designed in special shapes, and almond and sugar paste in the shape of baklava, and “mustachidos” - marzipan with nuts in the shape of a moustache. Her father used to keep them in a special white handkerchief, since he could not eat them all. People would walk around with the cloth, since they did not want to eat the food right away and had to visit many other families. This custom symbolized the closeness among the members of the community, and the sharing that was common among them.

On Rosh Hashana it is customary to eat especially sweet foods to bless the New Year. Several sweet delicacies were served: “naranjes,” “sharopi,” “maztapan” - marzipans, and “mustachidos,” “travados” - sweet beurekitos with walnuts, sugar and honey, baklava and biscuits.

There are three kinds of “pritades”- eggs cooked with vegetables, or with spinach or zucchini. Another kind was made with eggplant, “almodruta,” but it is not customary to eat it on Rosh Hashana since it is black, which symbolizes bad luck for the coming year.

The Fasts
Before “Yom Kippur” (day of atonement, the day of fasting and prayers, when Jews ask for forgiveness from God), the Jews have a ritual named “Kaparot.” Perla Carmon remembers her father - Hacham Carmon: “He got 3 or 4 chickens for the ritual and later slaughtered them. This way we had fresh meat for the following days.”

On “Yom Kippur,” before the “Ta'anit” (the fast), chicken, okra, rice pilaf, and tomato sauce are eaten. Everyone puts on their favorite sauce, which is eaten before every fast. Besides that, melon, coffee and a last cup of water are served. The fast is broken by eating bread with olive oil and salt; some eat anchovies. Afterwards, beurekitos, biskuches, roskas and “pan di Spania” (dry cake) are eaten. This cake is baked and eaten by people who came to Izmir from the town of Milas. “Travados” - beurekitos with walnuts, sugar and honey are next, and only then, about two hours after the fast ends, do the women start boiling soup.

It is customary to drink lemonade and “soubia,” a beverage produced from melon seeds that are washed, dried, crushed, then put with water into a cheesecloth, and drained after the liquid becomes white, with added sugar; it can still be bought on the streets of Izmir today.

Before “Tisha Be'Av” (a fast to commemorate the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem), it is forbidden to enjoy things such as swimming in the sea. It is believed that if someone goes into the sea, he might get a stain on his body. To prevent that, one has to hang a nail around his neck, and only then enter the water.

Sukkoth
Ya’akov Galanti remembers that a “Sukka” (a temporary dwelling erected outside the house and replaces the regular house during the holiday, made of wood covered with branches and decorated) was built every year at the “Bikur Holim” Synagogue, and that his uncle, who lived by the sea in Karatash, built one as well. "The house was by the sea and had three stories (on the bottom one a Turkish family lived). Every year, cloth ornaments were made, and salad, rice, and fish (which were everyone's favorite) were served. Fifty people could enter the Sukka and then bathe in the nearby water. The same would happen on Rosh Hashana and the Passover Seder, and the Turkish neighbors came to visit as well."
Perla Carmon told us that her father, Hacham Carmon, used to build their “Sukka” on their balcony, and in an open space near his synagogue, “Ginat Veradim.” She recalls the decorations made of cloth, and the Turkish neighbors who visited their “Sukka.”

**Purim**

Purim is a very colorful festival that cherishes the rescue of Persian Jews from the enemies who wanted to execute them. With the help of the Jewish Queen Esther, they were saved before the massacre. This story was perpetuated in one of the later books of the Bible - “Megillat Ester” (The Scroll of Esther). On the festive holiday of Purim the Jews read this scroll in the synagogues.

In Izmir the Megilla is part of the family heritage and an important heirloom. On Purim, every family reads from their private scroll in the synagogue. The handwritten scroll is usually wrapped in cloth and stored in a case. We saw two scrolls, one with a simple wood case, and the other made of silver, with delicate silver and gold ‘filigree’ ornaments, and red coral stones on top. The unique custom of passing the family’s Megilla from father to his daughter’s groom, is maintained even today. Some scrolls, which have been in the family for many generations, are still cherished by their owners, even though they cannot read Hebrew anymore.

One of the common customs of Purim is to masquerade as the heroes of the Megilla story. The picture from the 1940’s shows Ida Bonfil-Gabai, dressed as Queen Esther, the female heroine of the Megilla, which was a common costume for Purim. On Purim, “Oranos de Haman” (pastries in the shape of the ears of Haman, the villain of the story) were eaten.
The “Brit Mila”
Before the ‘Brit’ (circumcision - on the eighth day after birth), baby and mother stay home for seven days. On the day of the ‘Brit’ the baby is dressed in a silk costume, similar to the ones that Muslims wear, but with an opening in the front. Sarah Pardo found one in her mother’s home and framed it.

She described how the ritual was carried out: The baby was placed on a pillow and the words ‘Bo Hatan’ (‘Come, Groom’) is recited three times. The mother and her in-laws gave the baby to his grandfather (his father's father), who sat on a tall chair, called “the chair of Eliyahu” (we saw one covered with cloth at the Jewish Hospital). The ‘Mohel’ (the ritual circumciser who cuts the foreskin) asked the mother if she was sure she wanted the child to become a Jew.

After the circumcision and the giving of a name to the baby, the Mohel raises his bloody hands up and displays them to all present. Sarah thinks this was a unique custom in Izmir, probably done to assure everyone that the act had really been done (afterwards, of course, food was served).
Ritual baby clothing for the ‘Brit’ and name–giving ceremony (Yohas, 1989)

**The Bar Mitzva**

The Bar Mitzva ritual is carried out when the child reaches age 13. It is common even today for the family of the Bar Mitzva boy to donate an embroidered Torah cover to the synagogue. The mother of Matilda Leon, who now lives in Israel, used to embroider such covers. This kind of gift is called “Pasha.” Perla Carmon told us that her father used to prepare boys for their Bar Mitzva, when they must read from the Torah scroll in the synagogue. This would take months of preparation, so that they boys would be able to read properly. She explained that it is common on this occasion for the boy’s mother to sit with him and not with the other women in the “Ezrat Nashim” (the separate women’s section in the synagogue).

It was common to eat fried fish with a special sauce called “agristada” after the ceremony. The Bar Mitzva ritual takes place today at the “Beit Israel” Synagogue.

**The Wedding**

In the past, the “Hupa” (wedding ceremony) was conducted in one of the houses in the afternoon (before the sun sets), and nowadays it usually takes place on Sundays. According to the custom of the Sephardic Jews, the wedding is followed by a “Shabbat Hatan” (Groom’s Sabbath), a festive ceremony that takes place in the groom’s synagogue.

Perla recalls how, before the wedding, the bride went to a “Banio” (Mikve - Jewish ritual bath) or Turkish Hamam, to bathe. She was accompanied by a woman from the community who had borne many healthy children, for good luck. Upon arriving at the “Hamam,” she would put on a thin, handmade robe, which she took off in the water. Then she cleaned herself with a cloth and soap, and when she came out she wrapped herself in towels and put on wooden shoes (‘Geldes’ - with high heels). Afterwards, all the women (and children) came to her home. At weddings today the bride wears a white dress, although in the past it was colorful.

Hamam set: towels of silk and cotton, and wooden shoes (Geldes). (Yohas, 1989)
Today, if the women do go to a Mikveh, it is the one in the Jewish hospital. They are accompanied only by women: the bride’s mother, the groom’s mother, the bride’s sisters, an elder aunt and other friends. After the bride submerges three times and says the ritual blessings, she comes out and food is served - cheese beurekas, Haminados, buyos, and mille feuille - small balls of flour and cheese, stuffed with eggplant and tomato.

It is the custom for the groom’s mother to arrive at the bride’s house to escort her to the synagogue for the wedding ceremony, where the groom waits for her. The bride’s mother presents the groom’s mother with a “Kucharera” with white “Sharopi.” After the wedding ceremony, the close family gathers at the groom’s house, and his sisters break a cake, which has been made of marzipan in the shape of a house with birds, on the young couple’s head, to bring them luck.

Today all weddings take place in the “Beit Israel” Synagogue in the Karatash quarter, and the families usually continue on to another modern hall for the party. Years ago, as Ya’akov Bonfil told us, they used to hold weddings in the “Hevra” Synagogue as well.

**Clothes**

Jews used to wear traditional clothes. Restrictions on the way people dressed were common in traditional Jewish life, due to the desire to maintain one’s modesty, especially among women. This patriarchal, chauvinist point of view was also common in Moslem society.

In a text from the 18th century, written in Izmir by Rabbi Eliahu, son of Rabbi Shlomo HaCohen, there are some recommendations for the behavior of women, especially at home. It is recommended that “the woman should be clean in her dress, and her dress should always be white. There should not be any stain on it from anything, so that her husband will not give her up, stop loving her, and even start thinking of other women…”

The Benbenisti family lived in Meneme. Like many other Jews from that town, the family migrated to Izmir at the beginning of the 20th century. It looks as if the woman is wearing the traditional Jewish dress. She is also wearing a “Tokador” - a kind of hat that was worn by Jewish women. It was very common until 75 years ago. The original reason for wearing the “Tokador” was to cover the women’s baldness since, until 150 years ago, married women had to shave their heads. The “Tokador” was usually held together by a special pin (sometimes a golden one). In rich families, the pin was a way to show off the family’s wealth - for example, a crescent-shaped golden pin inlaid with diamonds.
The Benbenisti couple, early 20th century. (Yohas, 1989)

The man is wearing typical Ottoman clothes, including the “Tarbush.” This is a good example of the modernization process, how the Jews tried to imitate the local custom by adopting their characteristic dress, and thus demonstrating their conformism with the non-Jewish society. That costume was prevalent until Ataturk came to power in 1923 and outlawed Ottoman dress. He ordered to stop manufacturing those hats. Jews (like Jamilla Shaul’s grandfather) who worked in that field, lost their jobs.

Shabtai Zvi
Shabtai Zvi was a mystic from Izmir who lived in the 17th century and thought himself to be the Messiah. After his forced conversion to Islam some of his followers, called ‘Shabtaim,’ secretly remained loyal to his ideas. The Jews of Izmir do not like to discuss this painful topic, and often denied any knowledge of the Shabtaim. When urged, they admitted to their existence but did not want to talk about the subject.

Rabbi Haim Palaggi
Rabbi Palaggi was the 'Haham Bashi' of Izmir in the middle of the 19th century, and founder of the 'Beit Hillel' Synagogue and beit midrash (study hall). He was very knowledgeable, and received letters from all over the world with questions about Halacha. He wrote 82 books addressing important issues in Jewish life. The community today is very proud of his legacy, and speak of him with great respect. In the synagogue, when his name is mentioned or cited, the congregation stands up and bows with respect.