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An overview of the Sephardic Cultural Heritage in İzmir through the lens of religious tourism

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the Sephardic Jewish cultural heritage in İzmir from the perspective of religious tourism, to raise awareness about this heritage, and to explore how it can be preserved and sustainably utilized through tourism. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study relies on secondary data sources to conduct a situational analysis. Within this scope, both tangible heritage elements, such as places of worship and residential spaces related to Sephardic Jews in İzmir, and intangible cultural heritage elements, including culinary traditions, handicrafts, and the Ladino language, are examined. Due to the limitations of the research, the four most prominent and best-preserved synagogues among the 11 Sephardic synagogues in Izmir were emphasized. For culinary culture, Boyoz and Sübye, known as Izmir delicacies, were discussed. The study aims to contribute to destination marketing strategies, the development of alternative tourism forms, and the preservation of cultural diversity. Additionally, it seeks to address a gap in the literature by contributing to the field of religious tourism through the relatively underexplored case of Sephardic Judaism in Türkiye.

Keywords: *Religious tourism, Sephardic Jews, cultural heritage, İzmir*

1. Introduction

Faith has been an important motivation for travel throughout history and continues to be so today (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). Recent studies reveal that the motivations behind faith tourism are multifaceted and layered. Not all visitors to religious sites are "devout travelers"; many secular tourists visit these places for entirely non-religious reasons, such as historical, cultural, or architectural interests (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Often referred to as spiritual tourism, faith tourism is gaining increasing momentum worldwide. While part of this growth can be attributed to the general tourism boom supported by rising incomes, technological advancements, information flow, and promotional activities, faith tourism in particular is expanding in direct connection with individuals' desire to gain knowledge and understand religions other than their own (Talã & Pãdurean, 2008).

Türkiye has played a significant role in the historical development of the three Abrahamic religions and hosts numerous sites considered sacred, particularly in Christianity and Judaism. The association of apostles and prophets with Anatolia enhances the religious tourism value of cities such as Ephesus, Nicaea (İznik), Antioch (Antakya), and Urfa. Throughout history, these lands have embraced religious diversity with tolerance, as reflected in the churches, synagogues, and temples built across various periods. Türkiye also holds great significance in Islam, with its mosques, shrines, and pilgrimage sites from the Ottoman era positioning it as one of the key destinations for faith-based tourism. Cities like İstanbul, Edirne, and Konya attract large numbers of visitors to their sacred structures, while sites considered holy by Christians–such as Ephesus, Nicaea, and İstanbul–also stand out. However, despite the abundance of faith tourism destinations across the country, it appears that this potential remains largely underpromoted (Sargın, 2006).

İzmir is a city that has historically hosted diverse ethnic and religious communities, and it holds a rich heritage of faith shaped by its multicultural character. The tangible and intangible cultural elements of the Sephardic Jewish community form a significant part of this heritage. The Sephardim are a community of considerable importance in relation to İzmir and its cultural identity. Having migrated over 500 years ago, they adapted to the local culture while striving to preserve their own traditions. This legacy, shaped by

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the Sephardic Jews' migration to İzmir during the Ottoman period, is still traceable today through architectural structures such as synagogues and cortijos, as well as through culinary practices, handicrafts, and the Ladino language. However, despite its historical and cultural significance, this heritage remains largely underrepresented both in academic research and tourism promotion, with notable gaps in its preservation and visibility.

2. Religious Tourism and İzmir

Faith tourism is an important form of alternative tourism that enables the historical, cultural, and religious heritage to be evaluated as a touristic asset. It refers to individuals' travels to places considered sacred in accordance with their religious beliefs and is regarded as one of the oldest forms of tourism throughout history (Bozca & Bahar, 2023; Griffin & Raj, 2017). Faith tourism not only includes pilgrimage journeys but is also broadly defined to encompass secular individuals who visit sites laden with religious symbolism (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Olsen (2022) conceptualizes faith tourism as a form of visitation in which sacredness and religious meaning are integrated into place, emphasizing that such journeys often evoke spiritual experiences for the visitors.

Anatolia has historically been home to a rich and multilayered mosaic of beliefs that extends beyond the Abrahamic religions. With the emergence of monotheistic faiths, significant religious events and structures transformed this geography into a sacred destination. Influenced by various religions over time, these structures evolved in form and have survived to the present day as a multicultural heritage (Değirmencioğlu & Ahipaşaoğlu, 2003). Thus, Türkiye possesses strong potential in this field due to its geography, which bears the traces of the three major Abrahamic religions, and its history as a host to numerous civilizations (Aktas & Ekin, 2007; Tuna, 2006). In this context, faith tourism in Türkiye encompasses a wide range of activities, including visits to pilgrimage centers, sacred sites, and religious structures.

Türkiye's faith tourism potential is particularly prominent in the Western Anatolia and Aegean regions, with İzmir holding a special place in this context. Hosting numerous religious structures since ancient times, İzmir is of significant importance in the history of Christianity. Notably, three of the Seven Churches where Saint John is believed to have preached–Smyrna, Pergamon, and Ephesus–are located in and around İzmir (Gündoğan & Çiftci, 2023). An assessment focusing on Manisa also highlights that the faith tourism potential of the Aegean Region, including İzmir, possesses the qualities needed for international promotion. The study particularly emphasizes that the House of the Virgin Mary, located within the ancient city of Ephesus, stands out as one of the most frequently visited pilgrimage sites by Christian visitors (Kartal et al., 2015).

İzmir is recognized for its significant cultural and religious heritage, particularly through its historic Jewish quarters and synagogues, and it is suggested that the city holds strong potential to become a multi-faith tourism destination (Tuna, 2006; Türker, 2016). However, in order to fully harness this potential, there is a need for effective destination management, infrastructure investment, and the development of international promotional strategies. Faith tourism in İzmir–and across Türkiye–is not limited to visits to sacred sites of the past; it also presents an important opportunity within the frameworks of cultural diplomacy and sustainable tourism.

3. İzmir and Sephardic Jews

The Jewish presence in and around İzmir has deep historical roots, extending back to ancient times. In 1492, following the conquest of Granada by Christian forces, the Spanish monarchs expelled the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula (Benbassa & Rodrigue, 2001). This marked the beginning of a difficult period for Sephardic Jews, many of whom sought refuge in regions where they would be accepted–primarily in cities with predominantly Muslim populations. Their acceptance into these lands was largely facilitated by the tolerant policies of the Ottoman administration, which offered Jewish refugees protection for their lives and property, as well as religious freedom. Among the Ottoman territories where these Jewish communities resettled was the city of İzmir (Benbassa & Rodrigue, 2001).

At the beginning of the 16th century, İzmir was a town consisting of five neighborhoods, four of which were inhabited by Muslims and one by non-Muslims. During this century, the port played a significant role in the city's development. As a result of this development, new neighborhoods were established, and the Armenian and Jewish communities began to form (Kütükoğlu, 2000). Towards the end of the 16th century, Jews from Thessaloniki, engaged in textile production, began migrating to Western Anatolia in search of easier access to raw materials and to continue their trade. Initially, Jews preferred Manisa, but by the early 17th century, due to İzmir's growing commercial potential, they turned towards the city. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Jews from Chios, Manisa, Thessaloniki, Safed, and Aleppo also migrated to İzmir, which had become an increasingly important commercial hub (Emecen, 1997).

In the early 17th century, as their population grew, the Jews of İzmir began to establish their own community and organize themselves. Over time, the community

was formed by immigrants from various origins. A struggle for religious leadership emerged among these Jewish immigrants from different regions, which had an impact on their social and economic life. The economic development of the city played a crucial role in the formation of the Jewish community in İzmir. The migration of Portuguese Jews and the internal population movement from Thessaloniki were of particular importance. The Portuguese Jews, who arrived last, were culturally and financially more advanced than their predecessors (Bora, 1995).

Relations between the Jews who had migrated from the Iberian Peninsula and the local Jews were often tense and problematic. These two groups, in particular, had significant disagreements over the interpretation of Jewish religious law (halakha). Moreover, the later arrivals did not adhere to local customs (halakha and minhag) and, instead of conforming to local practices, demanded that the locals adopt their own interpretations, thereby acting in contradiction to Jewish tradition (Pardo, 2014). The most basic indicator of this, Jewish immigrants to the Ottoman Empire named their synagogues based on their place of origin. Those who migrated voluntarily from Central Europe would name their synagogues with terms meaning "those who came by their own will" while those expelled from the Iberian Peninsula would name theirs after terms signifying "exile," such as "Gerush" (exiled) and "Sephardic Jews" (Spain) (Baykara, 1974). At the core of the struggle between the groups lay the issue of the Chief Rabbinate. The institution of the Chief Rabbinate was established when the Jewish community was first formed. In Izmir, the first Chief Rabbi was İsak Levi, who belonged to a family of Istanbul origin. The Jews from Thessaloniki did not accept him and instead elected Yosef Eskapa, whom they had brought from Thessaloniki, as the Chief Rabbi. The bipolarity partially ended with the death of Azarya Yeshuva Eşkenazi, who succeeded İsak Levi, and with Yosef Eskapa becoming the Chief Rabbi of Izmir. The main reason for the Chief Rabbinate struggle was that the community consisted of different groups: natives, Sepherdic Jews and Ashkenazi Jews. In the first half of the 19th century, Ottoman Jews were divided into two groups: reformist Jews, who advocated modernization (mostly Jews who had been expelled from Portugal and settled in Tunisia, the Balkans, and port cities of Anatolia), and conservative Jews, who sought to preserve the old order. Poor Jews, suffering under tax injustice, supported reforms as a path to salvation. The conflicts between these groups subsided in 1835 when Mahmud II recognized the institution of the Ottoman Chief Rabbinate. Thus, the disputes over the dual chief rabbinate in Izmir were brought to an end, and the Ottoman Jewish community came to be governed from a single center (Eroğlu, 1997).

From the 19th century, with the development of trade and the increasing ability of Jews to integrate into broader society, the growing and wealthier Jewish community saw fewer members residing in the Frenk District. They moved into more affluent homes in neighborhoods like İkiçeşmelik, Keçeciler, Karantina, Karataş, and Göztepe, establishing new Jewish quarters and constructing synagogues with distinct architectural styles. Although fewer in number, a group of Jews also settled in Alsancak, Karşıyaka, and Bornova, founding small Jewish communities with synagogues. For the small Jewish community in Karşıyaka Alaybey, the Kal Kadoş Synagogue was built; the Algranti and Levi Synagogues were established for the Bornova community and at the beginning of the 20th century, the largest synagogue in İzmir, Beit Israel, was constructed to serve the Karataş and surrounding areas (İzmir Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2025c).

During this period, the new architectural approach led to significant changes in the planning scale of some previously constructed Sephardic synagogues, particularly in the Kemeraltı area but it doesn't mean that Bet Israel doesn't belong to Sephardic Jews, architectural forms may change, but history, ethnic identity and belonging always remain the same. The four synagogues mentioned in this study are synagogues that still exist today and belonged to Sephardic Jews in history. The reasons for choosing these synagogues are both their continued existence and they're being the best examples of the cultural heritage of Sephardic Jews.

By the late 19th century, it is estimated that approximately 15,000 Jews lived in the urban center of İzmir, with around 50 synagogues in operation across the city. However, due to various developments in the early 20th century–including emigration to Europe and the United States, as well as the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948–the Jewish population in İzmir declined significantly, falling to around 2,500. Today, the Jewish population in İzmir is estimated to be approximately 1,300 (Arslan, 2016; Danon, 2024; Nahum, 2000).

Therefore, İzmir stands out as a significant destination for faith tourism not only due to its Christian and Islamic heritage, but also because of its Jewish legacy (Türker, 2016). This historical foundation represents a valuable potential for the development of Jewish faith tourism today. İzmir's historic Jewish neighborhoods, synagogues, and intangible cultural heritage lie at the heart of this potential. In particular, structures such as the Bet Israel Synagogue and the Hevra Synagogue–both located in the Karataş district and revitalized through restoration efforts–serve as important attractions for faith tourism (Fishman, 2022). These sites are not only places of worship but also cultural

memory spaces that preserve the historical traces of the Jewish community. İzmir's Jewish faith tourism potential stands out with its historical depth, cultural diversity, and spatial heritage. Through effective destination management, the preservation of cultural heritage, and strategic promotion efforts, this potential can be harnessed in a way that contributes to sustainable tourism.

4. The Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Sephardic Jews in İzmir

4.1. Tangible Cultural Heritage Elements

Havra Street

Havra Street, named after the numerous synagogues located nearby, historically functioned as a vibrant commercial hub central to the production and sale of kosher (kasher) food in İzmir. Due to religious dietary requirements, members of the Jewish community primarily sourced essential food items–such as meat, fish, poultry, yogurt, cheese, and eggs–from this district. Alongside these staples, wine production also adhered strictly to kosher laws and was commonly undertaken in and around Havra Street. This localized system of kosher food supply underscores the embedded nature of Jewish dietary laws in shaping urban culinary spaces within diasporic settings like İzmir, once home to a thriving Sephardic community (Marks, 2005; 2010).

Synagogues

The term *synagogue* is of Greek origin and literally means "assembly" or "meeting". In traditional societies, synagogues are not used solely for religious worship. In addition to serving as places of prayer, they function as community councils where decisions are made, educational centers, and social spaces where members of the congregation gather (Benbassa & Rodrigue, 2001). There are 11 Sephardic Jewish synagogue structures in İzmir. However, this study will focus on four prominent and well-preserved examples among them. Below is the full list of these synagogues in İzmir (İzmir Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2025a; İzmir Jewish Heritage, 2021):

- Algazi Synagogue
- Bet Hillel Synagogue
- Bet Israel Synagogue
- Bikur Holim Synagogue
- Etz Hayim Synagogue
- Foresteros (Orahim) Synagogue
- Hevra Synagogue
- Portugal Synagogue
- Roş A'har Synagogue
- Shalom (Aydınlılar) Synagogue
- Sinyora Synagogue

Bet Israel Synagogue

In the mid-19th century, a rising Jewish bourgeoisie began relocating from traditional Jewish quarters and established a new residential area along the southern coast and hills of the bay, now known as the Karataş district. This demographic shift reflected broader socio-economic transformations within İzmir's Jewish community (Arslan, 2014). As the population in this newly settled area grew, the existing synagogues became inadequate for communal worship. Consequently, a petition was submitted to Sultan Abdulhamid II requesting permission to build a new and larger synagogue. Following the Sultan's approval, construction of the Bet Israel Synagogue commenced on March 15, 1905, and the synagogue was officially opened for worship in 1907. However, due to economic difficulties, the completion of its interior decoration was delayed, and the synagogue only attained its current state in 1950 (Baldan et al., 2022).

Bet Israel is recognized as İzmir's largest, most ornate, and ceremonially significant synagogue. Its architectural design and spatial configuration diverge notably from the traditional İzmir synagogue layout. Unlike many older synagogues in the city, bet Israel was not constructed with a central floor plan; nevertheless, it has featured a dual *Tevah* (Torah reading platform) since its inception. Due to the orientation of the plot, the *Ehal* (Ark of the Torah) was placed on the southern wall rather than the eastern one (Ventura, 2007; Zeren, 2019). Although an initial plan envisaged a large dome, financial constraints led to the installation of a smaller, centrally positioned dome. The synagogue's woodwork, reminiscent of Italian synagogue architecture, was crafted by Italian artisans using solid mahogany. Bet Israel is a two-story building; while the ground floor was allocated for male congregants, the upper gallery was reserved for women. Today, the upper floor serves as a small exhibition space featuring religious artifacts, historical documents, and photographs (Martan, 2024).

Portugal Synagogue

Portugal Synagogue uniquely preserves the ethnic identity of its founders in its name and stands as one of the city's oldest synagogues, likely constructed in the 1630s by Portuguese Sephardic Jews (Çakmak & Bora, 2020). It was among the six synagogues known to be active under the leadership of Chief Rabbi Yosef Eskapa in the 1620s (Arslan, 2016). In the 17th century, the synagogue became deeply entwined with the Sabbatean movement led by Sabbatai Zevi. Initially a bastion of opposition, the Portugal Synagogue closed its doors to Zevi when the messianic fervor spread. However, as his movement gained momentum, Zevi and his followers forcibly breached the synagogue, expelled opposing rabbis, and proclaimed the day of

redemption–thereby transforming the synagogue into a central site for Sabbatean adherents (Arslan, 2016).

The synagogue endured several major calamities over the centuries, including devastating fires in 1772, 1841, and a particularly severe conflagration in 1976 that destroyed its woodwork and ceiling (Çakmak & Bora, 2020). After a comprehensive restoration between 2017 and 2018, the synagogue was reopened as a social and cultural activity center, preserving its historical architecture and continuing to serve as a symbol of Jewish heritage in İzmir (Çakmak & Bora, 2020). It is also formed an integral part of the urban fabric of İzmir's Jewish quarters–alongside Karataş and Bornova neighborhoods–where Portuguese-origin Jews left a lasting influence on both local architecture and communal life (Arslan, 2016; Zeren, 2019).

Shalom (Aydınlılar) Synagogue

The Shalom (also known as *Aydınlılar* or *Peace*) Synagogue is one of the synagogues built during the period of Jewish prosperity in İzmir. It is known to have been constructed in the 1600s by a congregation that migrated to İzmir from the city of Aydın. Designed in the traditional Sephardic synagogue style, the structure features a water installation in the courtyard for ritual use before entering the prayer area. Access to the main sanctuary is provided through an arched, glass-paneled iron door. Due to the presence of a well in its courtyard, it is also colloquially known as the "pump synagogue" (*Tulumbalı*). The building underwent significant repairs in 1800 and again in 1841 (Pardo, 1995).

Sinyora (Giveret) Synagogue

The synagogue was built through the efforts of Donno Gracia Mendes, one of the Jews who migrated from Portugal to İzmir between 1510 and 1569. As she was a highly respected female leader of her time, the synagogue was named Sinyora, meaning "lady" in reference to her status. The structure is two stories high and consists of a single large hall. Its walls are constructed of rubble stone, and it features a wooden hipped roof. Both the ceiling and floor are made of wood. Entry is provided through a large and impressive metal door with two wings opening to the outside. The synagogue was damaged in the fire of 1841 and was rebuilt with the support of the Yeruşalmi family (İzmir Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2025a; Tanaç, 2010).

Cortijos (Traditional Jewish Courtyard Complex)

Sephardic Jews migrated from the Iberian Peninsula to the Ottoman Empire, bringing with them not only their cultural traditions but also distinctive domestic architectural forms that blended into the urban fabric of İzmir. Locally referred to as *Yahudhane* (Jewish House) or *Kortijo*, these residences typically featured a guest room and a courtyard–often containing a well or fountain–surrounded by rooms arranged over two stories (Hamamcıoğlu Turan et al., 2021). The first cortijos were built in İkiçeşmelik, the earliest Jewish settlement quarter in İzmir, and have since become iconic within the city's architectural and social memory (Arslan, 2016; Hamamcıoğlu Turan et al., 2021). More than just extended family homes, these dwellings supported multi-generational living and fostered an inward-oriented domestic environment: their central courtyards enclosed by two-storey room units cultivated intimacy, privacy, and a strong sense of communal life (Hamamcıoğlu Turan et al., 2021).

Cortijos also served as collective shelters addressing security concerns and communal cohesion needs of the Jewish minority within İzmir's multicultural metropolis (Hamamcıoğlu Turan et al., 2021). Although 27 cortijos were documented in 1982, subsequent anthropological and architectural surveys indicate that only around five or six have survived to the present day, representing a significant loss in both architectural heritage and cultural memory (Arslan, 2016; Hamamcıoğlu Turan et al., 2021).

In conclusion, İzmir's tangible cultural heritage embodies the enduring spatial and cultural legacy of the Sephardic Jewish community in the city. Each site, beyond its architectural value, serves as a reflection of communal memory and the historical evolution of Jewish life in İzmir. Although many of these sites have been lost over time, those that remain offer valuable insights into İzmir's multicultural identity and the enduring legacy of its Jewish heritage. Preserving and documenting these spaces remain vital not only for architectural history or destination marketing but also for a deeper understanding of the city's diverse cultural fabric and sustainability.

The Historical Elevator

Constructed in 1907 by Sepherdic Jew entrepreneur Nesim Levi (Bayraklı), the Elevator Tower in Karataş spans 55 meters and links Mithatpaşa and Halil Rifat Pasha streets, which are divided by steep cliffs in İzmir. Initially powered by steam, the tower was later converted to run on electricity (İnanç, 2017). At the beginning of the 20th century, prior to the construction of the Elevator, individuals in the region had to choose between a long pedestrian path and a stairway consisting of 155 steps for ascending and descending. Originally featuring two water-powered elevator cabins, this public street elevator tower not only facilitated pedestrian traffic but also represented an innovative means of transportation that contributed to the city's progress (İzmir Jewish Heritage, 2021). This structure, which connects Mithatpaşa Street to the Halil Rıfat Paşa district also served as a means for the transport of goods, mail, and small-scale cargo during that period. In this regard, the Historical Elevator can

be considered one of the early examples of urban logistics (Turan and Aslan, 2018). In Turkey, the hydraulic elevator system was the first of its kind. Since its construction, it has been utilized for a variety of purposes, including a cinema, a casino, a tobacco shop, and a city viewing platform. Today, it is managed as two separate establishments by the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality's Grand Plaza Food-Tourism Incorporated (İnanç, 2017). The street where the Historical Elevator is located is named after the famous artist Dairo Moreno, who once lived there, and is now under protection.

The constructor of The Historical Elevator Nesim Levi (Bayraklı) is an important figure for İzmir Sephardic Jewish community. He was a philanthropist businessman, known for his innovative and entrepreneurial spirit. During his travels, he sought to implement the innovations he encountered in his own city, working to support the socio-economic development of İzmir. In addition to commissioning the Elevator Tower, which was inaugurated in 1907, he donated one of his mansions for the construction of the Karataş Jewish Hospital, ensuring that the revenue generated from the Elevator became one of the main financial sources for the hospital. Furthermore, he facilitated the construction of at least two small-scale synagogues to accommodate the growing Jewish population in the area, and contributed to many of the city's charitable initiatives. Levi, who also served as a member of the Provincial Council for two years, obtained the necessary permits for the establishment of an 'Industrial Club' in the Frenk District of İzmir, aimed at enhancing the city's foreign trade relations. Born in İzmir in 1849, Nesim Levi (Bayraklı) passed away in Paris in 1926 (Bora, 2015).

4.2. Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements

Sephardic Jewish Cuisine

During the Middle Ages, two major cultural influences shaped Sephardic cuisine: Roman in the north and Arab in the south. On the Iberian Peninsula, the Romans cultivated olives and wheat, while the Arabs cultivated rice and sugarcane, as well as almonds, citrus fruits, eggplant, spinach, and artichokes. Thus, all of these products became integral components of Sephardic cuisine (Kaya, 2019). When Sephardic Jews were expelled from Spain and migrated to the Ottoman Empire, they brought their rich culinary heritage with them. In exile, they sought to preserve their most treasured cultural assets–their language and cuisine–while also adapting to the culinary customs of their new environment (Öney Tan, 2010). Over time, they began to speak Turkish, yet continued to use Ladino among themselves, particularly in naming traditional dishes (Demirel, 2010). This linguistic continuity played a key role in maintaining their food culture, enabling the preservation and transmission of Sephardic culinary identity across generations (Öney Tan, 2010).

Contemporary Sephardic cuisine represents a synthesis of culinary traditions brought from Spain centuries ago and the local food culture of the lands where Sephardic Jews eventually settled and became fully integrated (Alphan, 2012). It is a cuisine shaped by multiple cultural influences, all of which have been preserved and harmoniously blended. Pastries are among the most prominent elements of Sephardic cooking, with both Turkish and Spanish culinary traditions offering a wide array of pastry dishes. One of the most iconic contributions of Sephardic Jews to İzmir's gastronomic heritage is *boyoz* (Uhri, 2015). Originally referred to as "Jewish pastry" by İzmir's Muslim population, boyoz is derived from the Ladino language. The term itself comes from the plural form of the Spanish *bollo* and Ladino *boyo*, both referring to a small round pastry or bun (Şirin, 2015). Initially known among Sephardic Jews as *shabat*, since it was prepared for the Sabbath table, boyoz was traditionally baked on pans or trays until ovens became widespread during the Ottoman era. Over time, its distinct shape and preparation led it to be commonly referred to as boyoz, reflecting its Spanish origins (Yentürk, 2018). In 2017, boyoz was officially recognized as a geographically indicated product unique to İzmir (İzmir Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2025b).

Another distinctive food and drink within Sephardic cuisine is *sübye*, closely associated with the Sephardic Jewish community of İzmir. Sübye is a traditional beverage made from melon seeds. The preparation process–referred to as "making sübye"–involves crushing ingredients such as rice, almonds, walnuts, watermelon seeds, melon seeds, pine nuts, and pistachios in a mortar along with water (Yentürk, 2018). Historical sources authored by Sephardic Jews reveal that this drink is also known as *subya* or *subiya* (Antebi et al., 2005).

Handicrafts

Parokhet

The *Parokhet* refers to the curtain that covers the *Aron Kodesh*, the sacred ark in synagogues housing the Torah scrolls. This textile element symbolizes the veil that concealed the Ark of the Covenant, as described in Exodus 40:21. Historically, more than two hundred Parokhot dating back several centuries have been preserved, representing a rare and valuable collection. These artifacts serve as crucial primary sources for historical, cultural, and artistic research, particularly for scholars investigating Jewish visual culture and religious practices (Ünsal, 2023).

Shiviti Manuscripts

Shiviti manuscripts, which appear in Hebrew prayer books, on synagogue curtains and covers, as well as on the walls of synagogues and Jewish homes, have been produced since the early modern period. These manuscripts aim to externalize the presence of God by graphically representing the ineffable four-letter Hebrew name of God, the *Tetragrammaton* (YHWH). The four letters–yud, he, vav, he–serve as a source of spiritual inspiration in both prayer and daily life. These inscriptions are often accompanied by words and imagery associated with mystical forces, protective energies, angels, and significant places and figures from the Torah and Jewish history (Ünsal, 2023).

The Book of Esther

The Book of Esther, one of the five *Megillot* within the *Ketuvim* section of the Hebrew Bible, forms the liturgical basis of the Jewish festival of *Purim*. Esther, a Jewish queen of the Persian king *Ahasuerus*–traditionally identified with Xerxes I of the Achaemenid Empire–uses her political influence to save the Jewish people from Haman's genocidal decree. The narrative, set in the Persian capital of Susa, is commemorated annually during Purim, particularly on the 13th of Adar (İzmir Jewish Heritage, 2021).

Other ritual objects, such as the *Keter Torah* (Torah crown) and *Rimonim* (Torah finials), emphasize the Torah's spiritual supremacy within Jewish life. Typically crafted from silver and adorned with bells and gemstones, *Rimonim* are placed atop the wooden handles–known as *Etz Chaim* or "Tree of Life"–of Torah scrolls. These ornamental finials, hollow at their base, are regarded as significant expressions of Jewish religious art (İzmir Jewish Heritage, 2021).

Ladino Language

Ladino, also known as Judeo-Spanish, Judesmo, or Sephardi, is a Romance language historically spoken by Sephardic Jews across regions such as Israel, the Balkans, North Africa, Greece, and Türkiye. Today, Ladino is considered an endangered language in most of these regions. It evolved from a highly archaic form of Castilian Spanish, enriched with Hebrew vocabulary and shaped by contact with Aramaic, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, French, Bulgarian, and Italian. The language originated in Spain and was carried to new diasporic communities by Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 (Özkan, 2016).

While it was traditionally written in Hebrew script–particularly the *Rashi* and *Solitreo* alphabets–it is now more commonly written using the Latin script. The language also possesses a rich literary heritage, encompassing both religious and secular texts that have been translated or composed over centuries (Özkan, 2016).

Consequently, İzmir's intangible cultural heritage of Sephardic Jews demonstrates the community's ability to maintain its unique identity while interacting with surrounding cultures. These living traditions, passed down through generations, enrich the city's cultural fabric and offer valuable insights into shared urban life. In this context, they also represent significant cultural assets that require thoughtful protection and promotion within the frameworks of tourism, destination marketing and management, and sustainability.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Enhancing the benefits that faith tourism can bring to Türkiye is closely related to the structured and strategic development of this type of tourism. It is essential to establish realistic tourism plans and policies in regions that possess significant potential for faith tourism. These planning and policy efforts must consider several critical aspects, such as minimizing the degradation of cultural heritage, increasing visitor satisfaction, and ensuring long-term economic development of the destinations. As can be observed, Anatolia in general–and the İzmir region in particular–is a geography where the foundations of civilization were laid, rendering it especially valuable in this regard. Throughout history, these regions have served as focal points of multiculturalism. Accordingly, two main aspects should be given special attention to the planning process.

First, it should be recognized that the number of tourists who seek cultural and religious enrichment through visiting sacred sites continues to grow. This trend highlights the need for scholarly studies and publications on Anatolia's diverse cultural and religious heritage, including research focused on prominent historical figures. In this context, it is crucial for local communities to develop a sense of identification with the multicultural geography they inhabit, assist visiting tourists, and take ownership of the ancient historical textures of their regions.

Second, İzmir region holds a special place in Jewish history, making it necessary to develop itineraries and tour packages that specifically address faith-based travel in this area. In general, the development of faith tourism in Türkiye is hindered by a lack of promotion and organization, infrastructure deficiencies, and marketing challenges. Promoting faith tourism in Türkiye is of great importance not only for its potential to generate economic income but also for the intrinsic spiritual, educational, scientific, and artistic values it holds. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that people have a right to know and appreciate these values, which

further underscores the need for increased research and development in the field of faith tourism.

This study is based on a conceptual framework. Future studies could explore the awareness of this heritage among various stakeholders in Izmir, such as Sephardic Jews, travel agencies, local administrators, academics, and tourists. Research on the preservation and sustainable management of this heritage is also crucial. Conducting more comprehensive research on specific topics for Sephardic cultural heritage will both contribute to the field and play an important role in the development of religious tourism in Izmir. For this reason, there is a need for studies that will address the cultural heritage elements one by one.

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