Rabbi Israel Najara (1555-1625) and the Jobar Synagogue

***The Jobar Synagogue, Eliyahu haNabi**, considered the oldest in the world, was destroyed in May 2014 during the Syrian civil war.*

Rabbi Israel Najara □□□'□□□ □□□ □□ □□□□□ was born in Safed, Israel in 1555. At a very early age, his family moved to Damascus, Syria. The family Najara comes from "Nájera", a small town located in the "Rioja Alta" , Spain, on the river Najerilla.

His father, Moshe Najara, served for many years as the chief rabbi of the Damascus Jewish community. On his mother's side, Rabbi Najara was the grandson (and namesake) of the famous Rabbi Israel de Curiel (1501–1573), one of the three *Musmakhim* (those granted rabbinic ordination) who had been ordained in Safed by Rabbi Ya'aqob Berab, alongside Maran Ribbí Yosef Caro.

In Damascus, Rabbi Moshe Najara led the *Mishmarot*. Among many Syrian Jews, the custom of *Mishmarot* continues to this day. These are long Tora study sessions held on the eve of *Rosh Chodesh* and every Shabbat afternoon.

Due to his father's position, Rabbi Israel Najara did not serve as an active rabbi in Damascus. Instead, he served as *Chazan* (liturgical cantor) and rabbi (traditionally, in Sephardic communities, these two roles were often held by the same person) of the Jewish community of Jobar (pronounced Dyobar or Djobar), a suburb of Damascus.

The city of Jobar was predominantly Jewish. The historian Shams Ibn Tulun al-Dimashqi, who died in 1546, wrote:
"Jobar is a Jewish village with some Muslim presence."

Jobar was famous for its synagogue: Eliyahu haNabi. We have a fascinating description of the city and its synagogue from a rabbi and traveler, Rabbi Moshe Basula:

"The city of Jobar is one mile from Damascus. The Jewish community of Jobar has 60 *Musta'arabim* families (= native Jews belonging to the ancient Syrian community; the term *Musta'arabim* is typically used in contrast to 'Sephardim,' the Jews who came from Spain. Eventually, both communities merged). In the city, there is a beautiful synagogue, unlike anything I've ever seen… with six columns on the right side and seven on the left.
The synagogue, called Eliyahu haNabi, was built above a cave. People say this is the cave where Eliyahu haNabi hid [when he fled from King Ahab], and that the synagogue dates back to the time of the prophet Elisha. [At the entrance to the synagogue, halfway up the right wall], there is an irregularly shaped stone, where one can see the imprint of multiple footprints. According to tradition, this is where Elisha anointed Hazael [king of Aram, ancient Syria].

The synagogue was restored by Rabbi El'azar ben Arach. People told me that many miracles took place in this synagogue. During times of persecution, the Jews would gather there to find refuge from their enemies."

Rabbi Israel Najara became very famous for his poetry. He wrote hundreds of religious poems known as *piyutim* (we know of 346), mainly focused on the suffering of the Jewish people and the yearning for redemption. His most famous poem is probably *Y-ah Ribbon 'Alam Ve'Almaya*, a liturgical poem written in rabbinic Aramaic, which has been adopted by both Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities. Another well-known composition is the *Ketuba for the Festival of Shabuot*, a poem read in many Sephardic communities on Shabuot, which compares the covenant between God and Israel to a marriage ceremony.

Rabbi Najara also authored a book titled Mikve Israel, a collection of 40 sermons he delivered in the Jobar synagogue. In these sermons (*derashim*), Rabbi Najara weaves together profound Talmudic ideas with philosophy and Jewish mysticism. Notably, his father, Rabbi Moshe Najara, was a student of the renowned *Mequbbal* the Ari z"l haQadosh, who held Rabbi Najara's poetry in high regard and once said:

"His poetry is greatly cherished in Heaven."

In his sermons, one can see that philosophical and

mystical elements were secondary for Rabbi Najara. His focus was on Musar – the ethical and moral teachings of the Talmud. Rabbi Najara aimed to teach and inspire people to improve themselves and refine their character. He often emphasized the importance of *tsedaqa* (charity), mutual financial support, and *gemilut jasadim* (acts of kindness not necessarily involving money), such as visiting the sick, comforting mourners, and more.

In the final years of his life, after the death of his father, Rabbi Najara moved to the city of Gaza, in Israel. He served as the rabbi of the Jewish community in Gaza until his passing in 1625, and he is buried there. Upon his death, his son, Moshe, succeeded him in this position.

To obtain the book *Mikve Israel*, click here