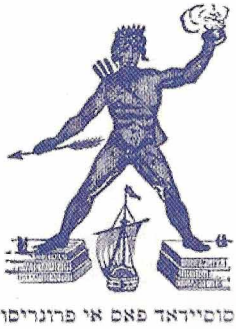


חברה שלום והולכי קדימה



The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation

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“KE HABER ?”

Newsletter for the Year 2003 Describing “What Is New” Regarding Rhodes Jewish History

By Aron Hasson

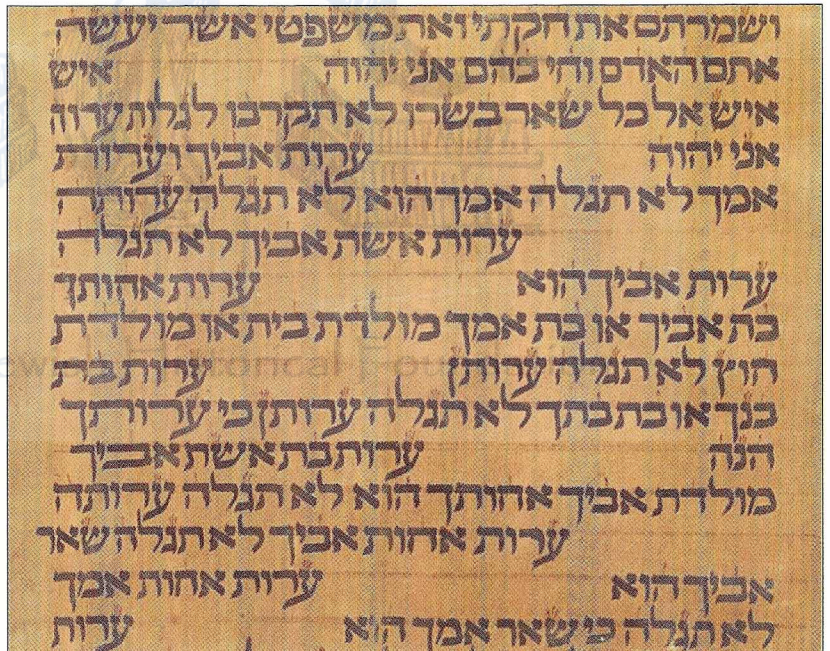
This is the third publication of the “Ke Haber?” newsletter by *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation*. This issue includes events over the past two years and serves as a link between the Jewish community of Rhodes and everyone who is interested around the world.

The past two years have seen an increased interest in the preservation of the unique cultural background of the Jews from this Island in the Aegean Sea including the restoration of the *Kahal Shalom* synagogue and cemetery in Rhodes and the growing international collection of photos and artifacts from this community.

800 Year-Old Sefer Torah From Rhodes--One of the Oldest Scrolls in the World

In 2001, a Sefer Torah from the Island of Rhodes was scientifically measured using the Carbon-14 dating analysis and was found to be approximately 800 years-old. The scroll was examined by the institute “Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Cientificas y Tecnicas”, a department of the University of Buenos Aires. This creates a significant link to Rhodes, as well as a special historical insight into early Judaic religious writings.

The specific origin of this ancient Sefer Torah has not yet been determined. It could have been from the Iberian Peninsula and brought to the Island of Rhodes with the large number of Sephardic exiles who settled there hundreds of years ago. Alternatively, since Jews have lived in Rhodes from ancient times, the Torah could have its origins in the Aegean Sea area or even the Holy Land.



Initial research indicates an unusual writing and spacing style dating to the time of Maimonides which is no longer used in modern scrolls. Further investigative research will be conducted under the aegis of *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation* to determine the origin as well as religious significance of this special treasure.

800 Year-Old Sefer Torah From Rhodes Arrives in Los Angeles for Exhibition

April 2003: An 800 year-old Sefer Torah, originally from the Island of Rhodes, has arrived in Los Angeles for exhibitions which will highlight the history of the Jewish community of Rhodes. This endeavor is a result of the efforts of Aron Hasson, the Founder of *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation*. The scroll will be on display in September 2003 at the *Levy Family Exhibition Center of Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel* in Los Angeles before being taken on tour of several Jewish communities in the United States.

Background of the Torah:

In September 1943 the German military commanders took control of Rhodes. Several months later, recognizing an escalation of insecurity, the Jewish community leaders gave their Torahs to

the Turkish community leaders for safe keeping. Sadly, in July 1944, the Jews of Rhodes were deported to Auschwitz where most of them died. After the War, the Torahs were returned to the few people of the Jewish community that survived.

In 1984, the President of the *Jewish Community of Rhodes*, Maurice Soriano, transferred possession of this particular ancient Sefer Torah to the *Chalom* synagogue in Buenos Aires, Argentina which consisted of many Jews from Rhodes. This was facilitated by Salvador Notrica, then President of the *Chalom* synagogue.

In January 2002, Aron Hasson, on behalf of *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation*, traveled to Buenos Aires to make arrangements to bring the Torah to the United States for a 1-year exhibition.



At left: Aron Hasson speaking to the members of the *Chalom* synagogue in Buenos Aires regarding the establishment of *The Jewish Museum of Rhodes* and the recent restoration work being undertaken on the *Kahal Shalom* synagogue and the Jewish cemetery of Rhodes. The right photo shows Aron Hasson in Buenos Aires viewing the 800 year-old Torah.

April 2003: The First Views of the Torah in Los Angeles:



The left photo shows the first day in the United States of the 800 year-old Sefer Torah from Rhodes (left to right: Marcelo Benveniste, Executive Secretary of the Board of Directors of the *Chalom* synagogue of Buenos Aires, Aron Hasson, Neil Sheff and Arthur Benveniste). The photo on the right shows Rabbi Moshe Benzaquen comparing and analyzing the Torah with Neil Sheff.

Recent Highlights

Tour Program Initiated for the *Kahal Shalom Synagogue* and *The Jewish Museum of Rhodes*



Two years ago, a model "tour program" was initiated for the *Kahal Shalom* and *The Jewish Museum of Rhodes*. The synagogue and museum receives up to 200 visitors each day in the summer months. The "tour program" offers visitors an interesting opportunity to learn about the background and history of the synagogue and Jewish community. The tour has occasionally been conducted by the Jewish youth of Rhodes and hopefully will be expanded to be a continuous formal tour sponsored by the *Jewish Community of Rhodes*.

The tour begins with an explanation of the several historical references of the Jewish presence in Rhodes from ancient times. The focus then turns to the various cultures under which the Jews of Rhodes lived from ancient times through the Middle Ages. The story also explains how, as a result of the Spanish Inquisition, the large number of Sephardic Jews found refuge in Rhodes and integrated with the pre-existing Romaniot Jewish community. The program then

describes how the Jewish community managed to live through the various conditions of the Turkish, Italian and German occupations of the Island as well as their deportation and tragedy in Auschwitz.

The tour also describes the architectural layout of the *Kahal Shalom* synagogue, the oldest synagogue in Greece, which was built in the 1500's. Visitors are shown the several plaques and artwork on the walls of the synagogue as well as other design details.

The tour is then led through the larger courtyard to *The Jewish Museum of Rhodes* which was established in 1997. Visitors then have an opportunity to view a collection of over 100 photos of Jewish life in Rhodes before the Holocaust - from school and family photos to weddings and social affairs. An audio-tape was set up to play Judeo-Spanish ("Ladino") folk songs and prayer songs for the visitors of the museum (all authentic songs sung by Jews who were born in Rhodes).

September 2000 High Holidays:



Arthur Benveniste (on the left) reading at the "teva" (reading table) with a rabbi and hazan from Israel. Services for the High Holidays attract visitors from all over the world, including former residents and descendants of Jewish families from Rhodes.

May 2001 Handrail Installation:



The *Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation* initiated and directed the installation of a handrail to assist certain visitors to walk up the steep steps leading to the *Kahal Shalom* synagogue and *The Jewish Museum of Rhodes*. In the photo is Samuel Modiano and Aron Hasson.

May 2002 Photo:



Dinner meeting of Stella Levi, Bella Restis, Aron Hasson and Samuel Modiano discussing mutual interests related to the Jewish community. The restaurant is located in the Alhadeff park in the Old Jewish Quarter of Rhodes.

September 21, 2003: The first United States presentation of the 800 Year-Old Sefer Torah from Rhodes will be inaugurated at the *Levy Family Exhibition Center* of the *Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel* in Los Angeles. It will be part of a 6-month exhibit which includes cultural and religious artifacts, photos and more.

2002 Conference and Reunion Commemorated with the Holocaust Memorial Dedication

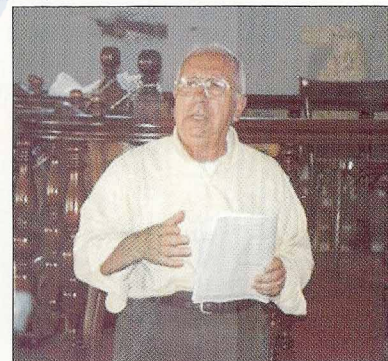
An unforgettable five day Conference and Reunion took place last June in Rhodes with cultural events leading to the dedication of the Holocaust Memorial. The participants came from many countries to share special moments linking them to the Island of Rhodes. It was a remarkable occasion that intertwined sad memories, learning, reflecting and fun.

The Conference and Reunion was highlighted by lectures and walking tours of the Jewish Quarter presented by former residents of Rhodes. The topics started with a basic historical overview and turned to the religious traditions. Then the speakers became more personal, describing the beautiful life they

enjoyed: going to school, playing games, going to the beach. The program offered the participants, many of whom were descendants of Rhodes, an opportunity to learn about the unique history and heritage of the Jews of Rhodes. An 80 minute video tape of the lectures and tour is available by contacting *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation*.

The events also included a tour of the Jewish cemetery and the detention center where the Jews were held for three days before being deported in 1944. The Conference and Reunion was presented and co-sponsored by *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation* and the *Sephardic Educational Center*.

June 2002 Lectures at the Kahal Shalom Synagogue:



The left photo shows the audience listening to lecturers: Joseph Alhadeff (center) and Isaac Levy (right).



Lecturers telling stories and describing life in Rhodes (left to right): Nace Treves, Albert Almeleh and Stella Levi.

June 2002 Tour of the Jewish Quarter and Reunion:



Left: former Jewish residents of Rhodes leading the participants through the small streets of the Jewish Quarter. They pointed out where the Jewish schools and businesses were, "la puerta de la mar", the public ovens and where different family homes were located.

Right: some of the reunion participants sitting on the steps for a photo in the Jewish Quarter in the "piazza del fuoco".

June 2002 Holocaust Memorial Dedication

The Holocaust Memorial was unveiled on June 23, 2002 in the Square of the Martyred Jews in the former Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Rhodes. It was a respectful ceremony to remember the tragedy that fell upon the Jews of the Islands of Rhodes and Cos.

The dedication was a culmination of several years of planning by the Greek government, in collaboration with the *Jewish Community of Rhodes*.

The Holocaust Memorial dedication was preceded by several events, including musical performances, memorial services, a bus tour as well as lunches and dinners. It was well planned and implemented by the President of the *Jewish Community of Rhodes*, Bella Restis, with special assistance from many others, including descendants of Rhodes from southern Africa.



The monument is six sided wrapped with a barbed wire symbolizing the concentration camps. Each of the six sides has a different language, Greek, Hebrew, English, Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), French and Italian, with the words: IN ETERNAL MEMORY OF THE 1604 JEWISH MARTYRS OF RHODES AND COS WHO WERE MURDERED IN NAZI DEATH CAMPS. JULY 23, 1944.



The left photo is of Samuel Modiano (now living in Italy and Rhodes) and Jack Hasson (now of Zimbabwe), both survivors of the Holocaust. The right photo is of Lucia Soulam, the caretaker of the *Kahal Shalom* synagogue and also a survivor.

The Ancient Burial Stones of the Jewish Cemetery

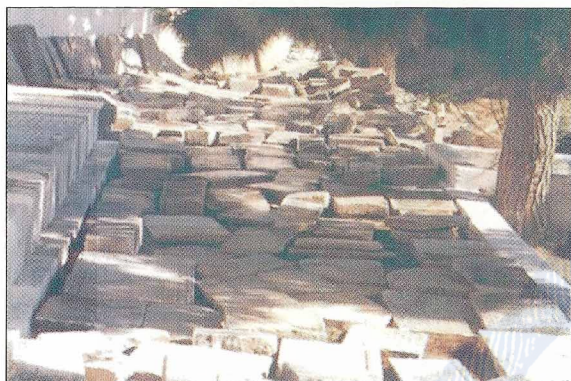
The Jewish cemetery of Rhodes has become one of the oldest, best preserved and historically significant Jewish cemeteries in the world. The centerpiece involves the recent recovery and restoration of 400 "ancient" Jewish burial stones.

In 1997 over 200 burial stones were uncovered at the Jewish cemetery. After initial analysis, *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation* arranged for the burial stones to be set up in rows along raised platforms, photographed and indexed. Unexpectedly, after the burial stones were translated, it was discovered that most of them were from the

1500's to the 1700's. Prior to this, the oldest known grave in the cemetery was from the 1840's.

Based upon that new finding, *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation* conceived the idea of erecting the burial stones along cement bases in order to provide dignity to the departed as well as offering appreciation of their historical value.

Within three years this became a reality, with the generous support of the *Maurice Amado Foundation*, along with the complete cooperation of Albert Covo, Jacob Sakkis and Maurice Soriano of the *Jewish Community of Rhodes*.



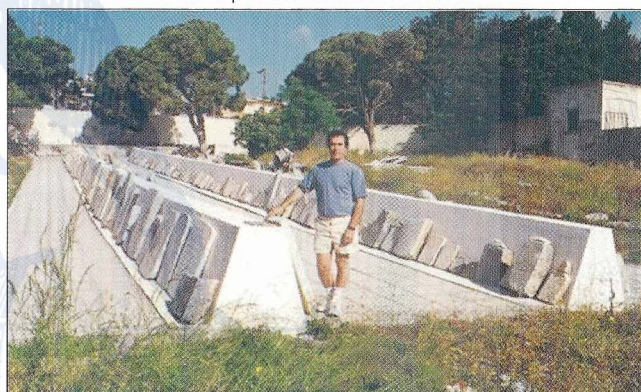
October 1997: view of the newly uncovered burial stones lying unorganized along a pathway.



May 1998: view of how the burial stones were planned to be erected.



August 1998: Hillel Franco and a view of the burial stones laid out along planned rows.



September 2000: view of the first two rows of the burial stones erected as well as walkways.

Recent Excavations, Restorations and Discoveries

In two separate projects, in 2001 and 2002, another 200 burial stones were uncovered. The photo on the right shows a sample of the most recent burial stones that were discovered in a far corner of the Jewish cemetery that was not previously excavated. The tombstones are from the 1600's to the 1800's.

In 2002, Bella Restis, the current President of the *Jewish Community of Rhodes*, implemented plans to further enhance the cemetery, including a new building structure, repairing the perimeter as well as landscaping. These special efforts help preserve the unique personal historical landmarks which create another bridge to the past Jewish presence in Rhodes.



May 2002: photo of several of the burial stones discovered in a far corner of the cemetery. Right: burial stone from the year 1671 of "Cadena, the daughter of Sasson Akiba", designed with a geometric and floral border.

A New Administration for the Jewish Community of Rhodes

In summer 2001, Bella Restis, became President of the Administrative Committee of the *Jewish Community of Rhodes*. Bella was born in the Congo to Rhodian parents (Albert Angel and Fortune Levy) and now lives in Greece. Mrs. Restis is assisted by Joseph Hassid, Vice President, and Andrew Mordoh, General Secretary. Carmen Cohen continues her dedicated service as the office administrator. Samuel Modiano continues his duties relating to overseeing the synagogue, museum, cemetery and other additional services.

Ancient Artifacts From Rhodes

The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation has received a number of special items once used by Jews from Rhodes. The collection is being prepared for exhibition at *The Jewish Museum of Rhodes* as well as being part of a traveling exhibition which will visit various communities around the world. The *Foundation* would be interested in acquiring additional artifacts and photos for its archives. Please contact this *Foundation* if you would like to share your treasures with future generations.



"Cucharera"—a silver container for spoons and forks for serving sweets. Side bowls would typically hold "sharope", a ground almond cream, or candied fruit called "dulce". This was used for all special gatherings including holidays, birth celebrations and engagement parties (called "mandadas"), or just Shabbat afternoon visits. This "cucharera" was made in Rhodes and is decorated with a Star of David on two sides. It was given to Victoria Hasson as part of her trousseau by her mother, Rachel Tarica. Victoria brought it to the United States when she immigrated in 1920.



This container and dispenser from Rhodes was used for fragrant oils and waters. It was also used at the Nehilah portion of the Yom Kippur services to dispense "agua de flor". It served to refresh the stamina after a long day of prayer services. This was brought from Rhodes to the United States by Hermana Miriam Hasson Levy in 1926 as part of her trousseau. This was donated by Sylvia Levy Aboulafia.



This menorah ("hanukia") was made in Rhodes of tin in 1906. The Hebrew calendar year 5666 is embossed on the back plate along with floral and border designs. The menorah was lit using pine needle wicks in olive oil.

The tinsmith of Rhodes at that time, Nissim Benveniste, made all of the "hanukias" for the Jewish community at the turn of the 20th century. His primary employee was Yitzhak Amato, a family relation to Nissim. This is from the family of Bellina Hasson Gold.

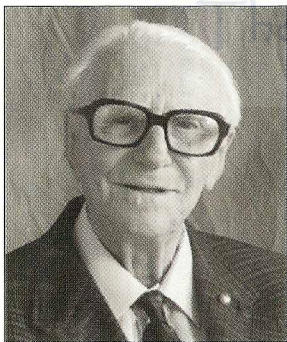


This trousseau chest ("baul") is made of wood with a metal reinforcement. It is decorated with a velvet floral pattern on top and in front, divided by wooden slats. It was used to contain the bride's trousseau, known by the Judeo-Spanish ("Ladino") speaking Jews of Rhodes as "ashuar".

The trousseau chests were also used as a luggage piece when a person traveled. This one was made in Rhodes and brought to the United States in 1936 by Salva Alcana Levy and donated by her family to *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation*.

In Appreciation

With sadness, we inform you of the recent passing away of three special people.



Maurice Soriano, the former President of the *Jewish Community of Rhodes*, passed away in June 2002 in Rhodes. He succeeded his father as President in 1947 and held that position for an extraordinary 50 years.



Hillel Franco, the leader of recent efforts to preserve the Jewish history of Rhodes with particular accomplishments to the Jewish cemetery. He was the inspiration to the founding of *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation*. He passed away in January 2002 in New York.



Selahattin Ulkumen passed away in June 2003 in Istanbul. He was the Turkish Consul General on Rhodes who saved more than 40 Jews during the Nazi roundup of the deportation in July 1944. In the photo taken in 1988, at an Anti-Defamation League ceremony honoring him, are two people he rescued: Bernard Turiel (left) and Matilda Turiel (right).

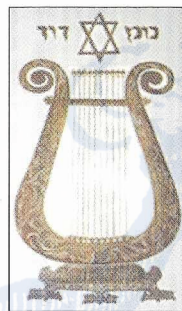
Restoration of the *Kahal Shalom* Synagogue

After several years of planning, the physical restoration has begun on the *Kahal Shalom* synagogue, the oldest synagogue in Greece. When completed, it will be a proud symbol of the unique religious life of the Jews of Rhodes.

Since the synagogue is several hundred years old, this special project is being undertaken by the Greek Archaeological Department. The first step has involved the physical analysis of the integrity of

the building itself and its structural foundation. Simultaneously, meticulous detail has been focused on the religious historical remains of the sanctuary. The complete restoration will take a few years.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the synagogue is the number of religious paintings on the walls. Most synagogues have few if any paintings, while the *Kahal Shalom* has several. The following are samples:



In 2002, in conjunction with the restoration, an interesting development occurred when the Greek Archaeology Department requested old photos of the synagogue from the archives of *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation*. Viewing the old photos they noticed a painting on a particular wall that is not

visible today. They carefully stripped away the most recent outer layer of paint where the old photos had shown a different picture. With excitement, an older religious painting was discovered underneath that was hundreds of years older (see below right photo). We look forward to reporting the details of this new finding.



This photo shows the eastern wall and the "tevah" (reading table) in the center of the sanctuary covered with plastic for protection during the restoration. Having the reading table in the center is a Sephardic tradition.



The structural engineers have dug a 10-foot hole along the north wall (see arrow) to determine the strength of the foundation of the walls and columns. From that excavation they have discovered a street which existed underneath where the synagogue was built.



The arrows point to the newly found older religious wall painting. This discovery was initiated based on the review of old photos from the archives of *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation*.

Special Thanks

The accomplishments of *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation* would have been impossible without the extraordinary support of the *Maurice Amado Foundation*. Since 1998, that organization appreciated and sponsored the efforts of a new idea to preserve the unique history and culture of a Sephardic community.

The following specific people deserve honorable recognition in their support of the activities of this *Foundation*. Joseph Alhadeff (Brussels), Stella Levi (New York), Neil Sheff (Los Angeles), Jacob Sakkis (Rhodes), Carmen Cohen (Rhodes), Bella Restis (Athens) and the late Albert Covo (Athens).

The *Foundation* would also like to thank the following families commemorating special occasions who have donated funds to help further it's goals: from the wedding anniversary of Jake and Sylvia (Sadis) Tarica; from the Bar Mitzvah of Ben Friedman (of the Piha family); the Bat Mitzvah of Michaela Solo (of the Codron family) and the families honoring Hillel Franco, Ralph Rousso, and Bellina Hasson Gold.

Finally, the *The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation* would like to thank all of those families who have shared their photos and personal treasures and all of the parents and grandparents from Rhodes for handing down the valuable traditions of their family heritage to the next generations.