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The Crisis of Modern Religious Zionism *by Shlomo Riskin*



Etz Hayyim: Chania, Crete, Greece

By Philip J. Davis

Until a few months ago, I had not known much about the Isle of Crete that sits in the Mediterranean 150 miles directly south of Athens. A few myths such as Ariadne threading her way out of the Labyrinth. An archaeological site: the Minoan Palace at Knossos. And much more relevant to my professional mathematical interests, the ancient saying in which Epimenides the Cretan asserted "I am a liar." If he was, then he wasn't; and if he wasn't, then he was.



My ignorance about Crete has now lessened, but puzzlement and paradox abide. Two events occurred. My wife's English cousin Ben, whose wife came from Greece, and who maintains a second house in Chania, the former capital of Crete, sent me an invitation to attend the rededication of a reconstructed ancient synagogue that had been totally destroyed by the Nazis. At the same time, I received an invitation to lecture at the University of Crete in Iraklion, the present capital, not far from the site at Knossos. I said yes to both.

I met Ben and his brother Teddy at Heathrow. Together we flew Olympic via Athens to Chania. I had imagined a small sleepy seaside village of little consequence. Instead, on October 6 we arrived at a thriving resort with a base population of at least 60,000 and bustling with tourists from Greece, Germany, Scandinavia, Russia.

Books of Cretan history, available in all tourist shops, distinguish twenty separate historic periods going back to before the "pre-Minoan palace" period (2600-1900 BCE) and up to the present post-World-War-II era. I suspect that a visitor with a trained archaeological eye would be able to distinguish remnants from all these periods often residing cheek by jowl with one another. Jews are reported in Crete as early as 150 BCE.

Ben's house, a few minutes' walk from the center of all the bustle, is an up-to-date four-floor structure, completely remodeled within an old Turkish frame. It sits in a square arrangement of a half dozen similar houses dating back to the Venetian period that box in a

courtyard. The houses include one ruin. The courtyard itself is populated by lemon trees, bougainvillea, hibiscus, and a multitude of cats.

The Chanukat HaBayit — the rededication of the Synagogue (the word "synagogue" itself deriving from the Greek, meaning a collection or an assembly) was to be a three-day affair, Friday through Sunday. On the Thursday preceding, Ben took me around for a private tour. The synagogue is located in the Old City on a narrow street, well within the tourist area, and is surrounded by a multitude of shops and restaurants. It is small, the main sanctuary seating — airplanewise — perhaps a hundred persons.

"It is hard to believe," Ben said to me as we entered its courtyard, "that just a few months ago this place was a complete shambles; rubble totally neglected and inhabited only by chickens."

Inside, several carpenters were putting the final touches on the bima placed against one wall and the aron hakodesh placed on the opposite wall. Ben introduced me to a slight man, wearing levis and with a cylindrical kippa of oriental design on his head: "Meet Nicholas Stavroulakis, the man who conceived and executed the whole project."

I did a double-take. Though I had never before met the man, I at once recognized his name and face. "Are you by chance," I asked him, "the author of a Greek-Jewish cookbook?"

"I am," Stavroulakis answered, and proceeded to elaborate in perfect English with an American accent.

How did I know? Well, some years back, my wife received as a gift *Cookbook of the Jews of Greece*, written by one Stavroulakis and adapted to the American system of weights, measures, and product availability by Julie Boegehold, wife of a colleague of mine in the Classics Department. Stavroulakis' picture was on the dust jacket.

Nicholas Stavroulakis is an amazing and to me slightly paradoxical character. He is simultaneously historian and archaeologist, a writer, a carpenter, an artist, a promoter, a fundraiser, an impresario, and a public-relations man. He is also, in a non-technical sense, more than a bit of a politician. He is of mixed Cretan and Turkish origins, educated in both England and the United States of America. He has taught at the University of Tel Aviv, and is past director of the Jewish Museum in Athens. At one time he was married to an American expatriate artist from Boothbay Harbor, Maine. He is not particularly devout in any religious tradition.

From the birth of his idea some years back, through the dedication ceremony, Nicholas Stavroulakis and the Etz Hayyim (Tree of Life) Synagogue in Chania have been synonymous terms.

On all three days of the ceremony, there was standing room only in the little synagogue; the overflow stood in the open air in two enclosed courtyards. Delegations came from the Jewish communities of Athens, Salonika, and other cities of the Greek mainland. Non-Jewish Chaniots were present. I, and a lady representing the World Monuments Fund, and perhaps a few others for all I know, constituted the American "delegation."

Late Friday afternoon, there was the mounting of mezuzot and the installation of a Sefer Torah. This was followed by the standard Mincha and Maariv service in the Sephardic manner, which struck me as including every possible repetition and even inventing a few unheard of by Ashkenazim. Special prayers were offered in memory of the Jewish Community of Crete, which by June 1944 had been totally wiped out.

On Saturday morning, the Shabbat service was followed by a kiddush in the courtyard with Greek appetizers. Through Ben and his brother-in-law Manolis, I met the local Member of Parliament in Athens.

At eight o'clock on Saturday evening, with long tables for a hundred or more set out in the narrow street

outside Etz Hayyim, and abutting a restaurant called, in quite appropriate Greek, "The Synagogue," a dinner was sponsored by the Demos Chania, the municipality. I was seated by chance opposite to the German Cultural Attache; Germany had contributed money for the reconstruction.

The meal began with *kokkines piperies* (red peppers) and *dakos* (toast topped with crushed tomatoes and olive oil). We worked our way through *dolmadakia* (stuffed grape leaves) and *fakes* (lentil puree) followed by pilaf, *arni lemoni* (lamb in lemon sauce), braised beef with potatoes, all washed down with liberal carafes of Cretan wine, and rounded off with fruit.

On Sunday morning, for the hour between eleven and noon, there were congratulatory talks by bigwigs: the Mayor, the ex-Prime Minister, the head of Athens' Jewish community, the American Foundation lady, and Nicholas Stavroulakis, who delivered in English a most moving address, he himself nearly in tears.

When the party ended, the mainland delegations returned home on chartered flights. Stavroulakis was left to lock up and to look in from time to time to make sure that the "pure oil olive, beaten for the light" was adequate to keep the Ner Tamid burning.

What future does Etz Hayyim have? There is no Jewish community in Chania now. A few individual Jews, yes, but no community. What does Stavroulakis envision? In poignant words, he said that his efforts to restore the synagogue were impelled by the hope that the building would stand as a symbol of reconciliation among the various religious and ethnic communities in Greece.

Over and above that, Stavroulakis envisions a cultural center, a museum, a place for intellectual discussions, inter-ethnic dialogues, and a place for the study of history with resident scholars. He is already negotiating to buy a large adjacent building. He is planning to hold a Seder next spring and rumor has it that the Hagaddah to be used and the meal to be served would be in the Romaniote tradition.

As for regular Mincha Maariv services? Who knows. The world renews itself in strange ways. Anyway, there is a website: www.etz-hayyim.hania.org. [5]

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