

Art & Culture

Inside the Ornate Churches Serving Two of Jerusalem's **Oldest Christian Communities**

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The interior of the Cathedral of St. James, the central Armenian church in Israel. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton



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Tours organized by Open House Jerusalem bring visitors to the heart of two ancient Christian communities in the Old City's Armenian Quarter: the Cathedral of St. James and the Syriac Church of St. Mark

In modern times, you do not need to pass through Jaffa Gate to enter the Armenian Quarter, one of the four sections of the Old City of Jerusalem; you can go around it via Omar ibn al-Khattab Street. But the 16th-century threshold, with its imposing metal doors (now plastered with stickers bearing the faces of young Israelis killed in the Gaza War or at the Nova festival) serves as a portal to an ancient refuge and cradle of faith for millions of people around the world.

This is where I meet Sharon Regev, my tour guide for the afternoon. She holds up a laminated photograph of British General Sir Edmund Allenby preparing to pass through the same doorway in 1917, after the defeat of the Ottomans in World War I. As a Christian, Allenby recognized the sanctity of the location; he humbly dismounted from his horse and chose to enter the Old City on foot. Baking under the October sun and surrounded by tour groups, Regev invites us to cross the threshold with the same reverence.

Regev, a diplomat of 30 years, is bringing me and Haaretz photographer Noam Revkin-Fenton on a version of the two tours she will be leading this weekend as part of "Open House Jerusalem," an [annual event](#) that invites Israelis and tourists into spaces – such as private homes and houses of worship – that are often closed to the public.

Leveraging her years of experience as the director of the Foreign Ministry's Department of Interreligious Affairs, on Saturday, she will be bringing groups to visit the St. James Cathedral complex and the Syriac Church of St. Mark.



Tour guide and diplomat Sharon Regev standing outside the Syriac Church of St. Mark in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton

"I love Jerusalem, and I think there's no other city like it anywhere in the world," says Regev, who lives in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan. "The amount of stories and history and culture and religions you can find here, you cannot find anywhere else."

On the way to the St. James Cathedral, she offers background: Jerusalem is bisected on two axes, dividing it into four quarters. The largest is the Muslim Quarter, with about 30,000 inhabitants; behind it is the Christian Quarter with about 6,000; the Jewish Quarter that was emptied in 1948 and has been growing steadily since 1967, with about 4,500 residents; and the smallest sector in terms of population, where we now stand – the Armenian Quarter and the 3,000 people who call it home.

After leading us through winding Jerusalem stone streets, Regev lets us in through an unassuming metal door across the street from a convenience store. There, an older church caretaker greets Sharon and welcomes us to the Armenian monastery. He declines to be interviewed, but shows us the heavy iron keys to the compound. "The Arab Ottomans promised us that no one would take weapons into the monastery, and that they would not take taxes from us," he explains. "In the monastery, there's no electricity – just candles." The door is opened at 5 A.M. each morning and closed at midnight.



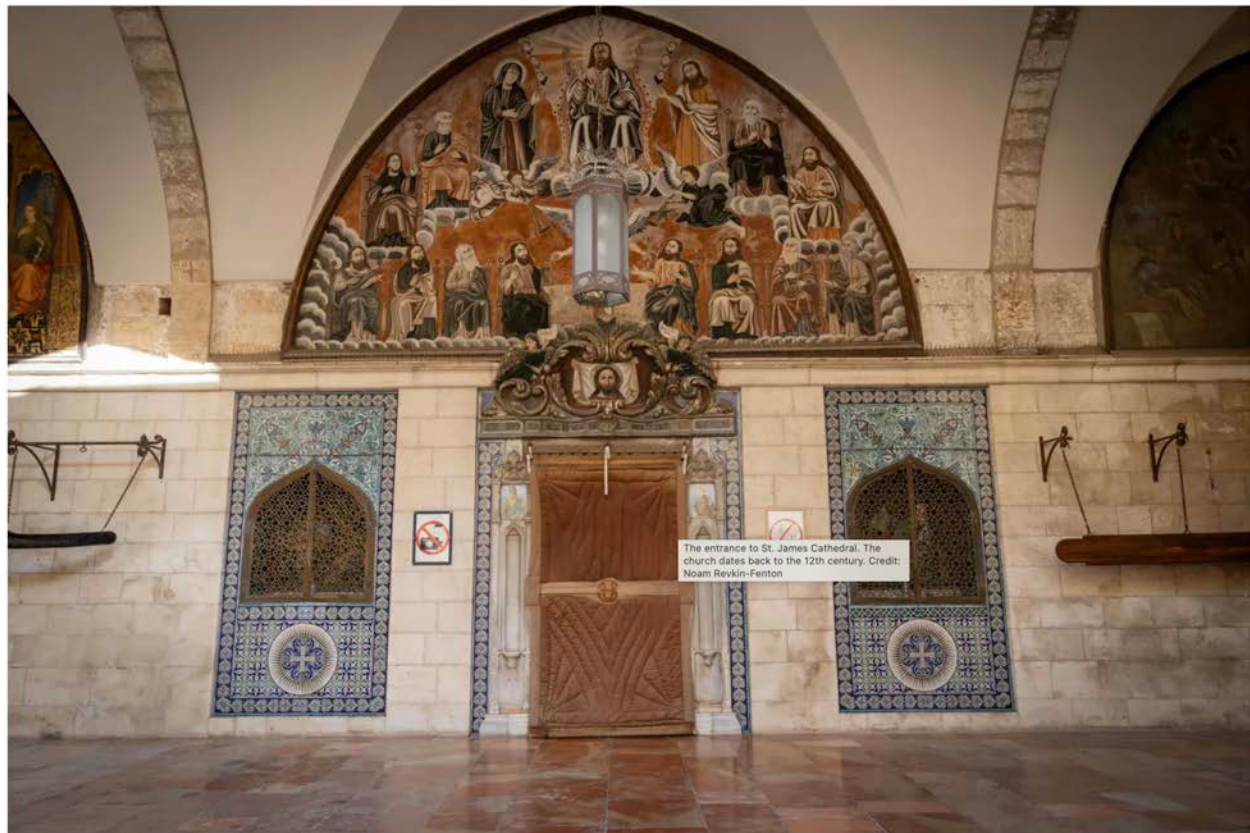
Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton



A church caretaker with the iron keys that unlock the Armenian monastery each morning at 5 A.M. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton

Inside is a maze of stone and insets with colorful mosaics. Sconces for candles, now empty, line the hallways, and Regev explains that they were brought from Armenia.

At the end of the hall is a courtyard – sunny and nearly silent – literally hermetically sealed from the crowded city. A young woman makes her way down the steps from an apartment within the complex without heeding us. A clergyman in a black cloak, pointed at the hood, crosses the plaza. Regev asks him to explain what his cowl represents, and he replies that it symbolizes the peak of [Mount Ararat](#), a mountain in today's Turkey but claimed by Armenia, that according to local tradition is where Noah's Ark landed.



The entrance to St. James Cathedral. The church dates back to the 12th century. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton

Regev focuses on history: Armenia's pioneering acceptance of Christianity as a state religion, and the post-World War I influx of thousands of refugees who came to the quarter fleeing the Armenian genocide. She points to the healthcare center that services the community and the apartments overlooking the small plaza, which provide homes to religious and secular Armenians alike, some of whom have been in Israel for generations.

"It's a little city within a little city," she says. From there, you can also see the two separate community centers for the Armenian population. "They have the one that they will go to, and the one that they will not go to," she explains – a familiar concept for Jews and Israelis on her tours.



The custom of banging a mallet against the wooden post is unique to St. James Cathedral and dates back to a 14th-century Ottoman edict that prohibited ringing church bells.

The entrance to St. James Cathedral. The church dates back to the 12th century. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton



Left The beginning of mass is announced in an undated photograph taken between 1900–1920. Matson Collection/Library of Congress; Noam Revkin-Fenton

A loud clanging – the sound of a mallet hitting a wooden post – signals that it is time for mass to begin. Under Ottoman rule, Regev explains, it was illegal for churches to ring bells, and the church adopted this method, still practiced today, to rouse worshippers. A couple dozen young men, some wearing robes, others suits, enter the basilica single-file: They are students at the seminary.

The inside of the dimly lit basilica is a visual marvel: blue-and-white mosaic tiles, intricate golden metalwork, darkened oil paintings and strings of incense burners line the walls and ceilings, where crystal chandeliers flank the apse; the floors are covered in colorful woven rugs. The small handful of tourists watch as a priest in a cowl kneels at the ornate altar at the back of the pewless sanctuary, and as a young clergyman begins recitations in Armenian from a small balcony on the side.



Ceramic tiles and murals depicting Jesus and some of his apostles at the Cathedral of St. James in Jerusalem's Armenian Quarter. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton

For the Israelis that she [brings to Christian sites](#), she says, the experience "is really an eye-opener." Growing up in Israel as a Jew, she says, many people don't learn about how non-Jews relate to the area, and Israel should invest more in teaching its history from other lenses. "We don't really put an emphasis on how the Christian world looks at the Holy Land," she says. "Just learning how Christians regard this land will add a lot to our understanding of it."

This would also help Israelis accommodate tourists and make Christian holy sites more accessible to them. In school, Jews learn about how King Solomon built [the First Temple](#), but not its relevance in the story of the [life of Jesus](#). "When we talk about the Temple we have to understand that there's a broader perspective, and I think it will make our life much richer – and also help us with strengthening the ties with different Christian communities and organizations."

A stop at the Last Supper

The next leg of the tour is close by, and when we arrive at St. Mark's Church, the deacon, Michel Zambil, is waiting for us. He hugs Regev warmly and greets Noam and me before hurrying us to a downstairs service – a group of pilgrims from India are here, and we can sit in on their mass. There is a massive Syriac community in [Kerala](#) – Zambil gives the figure of 2.5 million – who were converted by St. Thomas in the first century C.E.



The Syriac Church of St. Mark on Ararat Street in Jerusalem's Armenian Quarter. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton

Sitting on wooden benches in an ancient stone hall, I ask Zambil how old the church is. He suppresses a laugh, and tells me that the original structure was built in 1 B.C.E. According to the Syriac tradition, it sits on monumental ground: It is believed to be the site of the Last Supper, the washing of the feet of Jesus' disciples and the Pentecost.

He leads us to a room upstairs, which houses a Syriac-language inscription in its stone wall, discovered in 1940, proclaiming that the structure is the home of Mary, mother of Mark the Evangelist. Zambil pushes back a velvet curtain in the front of the room to show a glistening golden altar – it had just undergone two years of restoration by Mexican artists.



Deacon Michel Zanbil pointing to the Syriac-language inscription, unearthed in 1940, that declares the grounds were once home to the mother of Mark the Evangelist. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton

The Syriac community is a small one. There are about 100 to 150 Syriac Christian families in Jerusalem and about 500 more in Bethlehem, explains Zanbil, and they speak Arabic in their day-to-day life. He was born in Jerusalem, he says; his family was from Turkey, but his parents immigrated due to religious persecution. "I never met my grandfather, nor my uncle – they were massacred in the Sayfo," he says, using the Syriac word for [the Assyrian genocide](#) – the mass killing and deportation of Syriac and other Eastern Christian communities during World War I – an event concurrent with the Armenian genocide. About 500,000 Syriac Christians were killed in the massacres.



Indian tourists posing for a photo at the Church of St. Mark. Millions of Syriac Christians live in India; there are about 600-650 Syriac Christian families spread between Jerusalem and the West Bank city of Bethlehem. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton



A Syriac priest giving communion to a church-goer. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton



A Syriac priest swinging a gold censer of incense during a prayer at the Church of St. Mark. Credit: Noam Revkin-Fenton

Although he was never ordained, he says, the church "was in my blood." Zambil's father was a religious man who insisted on church attendance, fasting on Easter and taking Christmas trips to Bethlehem. "It's part of our tradition, but things change, unfortunately. But now, as we see, it's all renovated, so it's the plan of God – a good plan – to come back to church, to come back to God, to be kind to one another, to be permissive." He says that soon, they will get a new lighting system, too, so visitors can see the altar in all its glory. "You can feel part of heaven here," he says, beaming at the structure.

As we are about to depart, Zambil rustles through the cupboard again. Instead of crosses, this time, he's holding two carved wooden doves. On one side is an olive branch; on the other, the word "peace." He hands them to the photographer and me – a token of goodwill – and invites us to come back.

You can join these and other tours through [Open House Jerusalem](#), running on October 30 to November 1 and November 6 to November 8.