

For Immediate Release

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**MEDIEVAL TORAH ARK DOOR FROM CAIRO'S BEN-EZRA SYNAGOGUE
OFFERS DOORWAY INTO JEWISH CAIRO'S REMARKABLE PAST
NOW ON VIEW AT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM**

WHAT:	<i>Threshold to the Sacred: The Ark Door of Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue</i>
WHEN:	October 27, 2013 – February 23, 2014
WHERE:	Yeshiva University Museum, 15 W. 16th Street, NYC, 212-294-8330
COST:	Adults: \$8; seniors and students: \$6. Free for members and children under 5
WEB:	http://yumuseum.tumblr.com/ArkDoor or www.yumuseum.org

"Threshold to the Sacred: The Ark Door of Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue"
Includes Rare Manuscripts by Philosopher and Physician Moses Maimonides
and Poet and Philosopher Judah Halevi

Medieval Treasure Re-Discovered in Florida in 1990s

New York City, October 24 2013 – An exquisite artifact from a celebrated Cairo synagogue sheds light on daily life in the medieval Mediterranean – and illuminates the city's remarkable pluralistic past – in an extraordinary new exhibition at Yeshiva University Museum.

[Yeshiva University Museum](#), at the Center for Jewish History (15 West 16th Street) near Union Square in New York City, explores and interprets the artistic and cultural experience of Jewish life.

Threshold to the Sacred: The Ark Door of Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue focuses on a work of beauty and historical significance: an intricately carved and inscribed wood panel that formed part of the door to the ark holding the Torah scrolls in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Old Cairo. The ark door, which dates to the 11th century but was re-decorated over centuries of use, is jointly owned by Yeshiva University Museum and the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. The two institutions collaborated on and co-organized this exhibition.

The famous Ben Ezra Synagogue of Old Cairo (Fustat), Egypt, has captivated public imagination for over a century. It is the site of the 19th-century discovery of the Cairo Geniza, a treasure trove of documents considered the single most important source for understanding daily life around the medieval Mediterranean. During the medieval period, Old Cairo was home to some of Judaism's greatest figures – among them, the philosopher, jurist, and physician Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) and the poet, philosopher, and physician Judah Halevi (ca. 1085–1141).

In addition to a range of beautiful Jewish and Islamic secular and religious objects, the exhibition features seventeen original fragments from the Geniza that reflect the religious, communal and intellectual life of the community. Two draft manuscripts in the hand of Maimonides, a letter written by Judah Halevi, one of the

oldest surviving Haggadahs, and a children's primer are among the Geniza treasures in the show that help vibrantly echo the culture that surrounded the ark door in the synagogue.

The style of the ark door brings to life the multi-cultural character of medieval Cairo, which served as the political and cultural capital of the Fatimid Islamic Caliphate for approximately 500 years. The main carved decoration on the ark door reflects the direct influence of Islamic (Mamluk and Ottoman) design. The gold-tooled leather cover of a 14th-century illuminated Qur'an (from the Walters Art Museum) included in the exhibition demonstrates the Jewish inclination to borrow from Islamic sources during the era.

"The ark door has a fascinating story to tell," said Yeshiva University Museum director Dr. Jacob Wisse, who curated the exhibition. "As the face of the Holy Ark, it was the threshold to the most sacred place in the synagogue – the campaigns of decoration lavished upon it reflect that. At the same time, the door faced outward, toward the broader community. Its absorption of Islamic vocabulary reflects the synagogue's place in the larger Mediterranean world. Considering recent events in Egypt, it seems especially valuable to recall this pluralistic, historical era."

Presented alongside rare documents and artifacts are the results of recent scientific and technical study of the ark door that underscore the degree to which it was "updated" over the course of its history. Research undertaken by a team of conservators at the Walters Art Museum is demonstrated on special iPad kiosks that provide a glimpse into their methods, findings, and future research. Carbon-14 testing—a scientific method used to estimate the age of once-living things—confirmed an 11th-century date for the wood panel, the date of the first major reconstruction of the Ben Ezra Synagogue. X-ray study of the surface revealed the use of modern pigments and other materials at various stages of the panel's decoration.

The exhibition takes visitors up to the present. After falling into disuse, probably sometime in the 19th century, the ark door found its way to America. Remarkably, it was only re-discovered in the early 1990s in Florida after being bought at an estate auction house. It was jointly acquired in 2000 by Yeshiva University Museum and the Walters Art Museum. *Threshold to the Sacred*, first appeared in spring 2013 at the Walters Art Museum, curated by Dr. Amy Landau, Associate Curator of Manuscripts and Islamic Art.

Yeshiva University Museum has expanded the scope of the exhibition with the addition of, among other works, seventeen Geniza fragments and a rare 16th-century portolan chart (navigational map) of the Mediterranean — one of the most accurate and comprehensive in its time — by the Jewish cartographer, Judah Abenzara.

The exhibition will be complemented by public programs, including a series of gallery talks given by various scholars, who will focus on particular themes through groups of objects on display. Programming will be presented in collaboration with the American Sephardic Foundation, one of Yeshiva University Museum's partners at the Center for Jewish History.

The Geniza manuscripts in the exhibition appear courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which loaned seven fragments, and the Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, which loaned ten. In addition to the Walters Art Museum, the following institutions loaned works for the exhibition: The Jewish Museum, New York; the Canadian Centre for Architecture; the Klau Library, Cincinnati; Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion; the Oster Visual Documentation Center, Beit Hatfutsot, the Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv; the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; and the Philip and Sarah Belz School of Jewish Music and the Mendel Gottesman Library of Yeshiva University.

ABOUT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

Yeshiva University Museum is dedicated to the presentation and interpretation of the artistic and cultural achievements of Jewish life. The Museum, founded in 1973, is distinguished by its wide-ranging and intellectually rigorous exhibitions and, as the cultural arm of Yeshiva University, by its strong educational mission. As a partner in the thriving Center for Jewish History and a participant in New York's lively downtown cultural scene, Yeshiva University Museum makes a distinctive and important contribution to Jewish life and to the world of culture and the arts. The Museum's rich and diverse collections preserve Jewish artifacts, art, texts and material culture for posterity, making objects accessible through exhibitions, educational programs, and research and conservational initiatives.

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