

Historical Book of Esther stolen by Israeli rescue team returns to Turkey

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A member of the Israeli rescue team dispatched to Turkey displays the historical Book of Esther,

which was recovered from the earthquake-damaged Antakya Synagogue. (Photo by Palestinian Wafa news agency)

Ankara, February 22 (RHC)-- The theft of a historical manuscript by an Israeli rescue team dispatched to Turkey under the excuse of helping those affected by the earthquake has sparked an ethical scandal. Media reports said the team secretly took the Book of Esther from Turkey's earthquake-damaged Antakya Synagogue in Hatay province. The theft, however, was later discovered and the manuscript returned to Turkey.

The Turkish "Haber7" website said the Israeli search and rescue team had secretly taken the Book of Esther from Turkey's earthquake-damaged Antakya Synagogue in Hatay province before the theft was discovered and the manuscript returned to Turkey.

On Sunday, the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism confirmed the Anti-Smuggling Department had begun an investigation into this case. The probe will reportedly be dealt with in coordination with the Turkish Foreign Ministry after which appropriate decisions will be made. It is committed to preserving the heritage manuscripts of all cultures and religions, the ministry said.

The Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronot confirmed in a report last week the rescue team had moved the historical Esther scrolls recovered from the synagogue to Israel. The paper published pictures of a man it said was a member of the team holding the scrolls.

More than 40,000 people were killed by the strong earthquake that jolted southern Turkey on February 6, the latest official data showed. The quake was centered in Kahramanmaras and struck 10 other provinces. More than 13 million people have been affected by the devastating quake.

Ankara issued a Level-4 Alert, calling for international aid. More than 249,000 search and rescue personnel are currently working in the field, according to Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD).

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