American Synagogues
A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community

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Chapter One
House of Gathering

And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings—so you shall make it.

—Exodus 25:8-9

The Nature of the Synagogue

For approximately a thousand years Judaism was a religion with a fixed center—Jerusalem—and a fixed architectural identity, the Temple. First built by King Solomon in the mid-tenth century B.C.E., the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and subsequently rebuilt. The new Temple was desecrated by Antiochus IV Epiphanes beginning in 169 B.C.E., which led to a Jewish revolt and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty—the event celebrated with the holiday of Hanukah. Finally, King Herod built a substantially new and expanded Temple complex on an enormous raised platform, beginning around 20 B.C.E.¹

These structures, known collectively as the Second Temple, were destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. The date on which the Second Temple was destroyed was the same as that of the first, and ever since, the ninth day of Av has been a day of mourning and commemoration for Jews everywhere. There are no physical remains of any of the original Temples. Only the platform erected by Herod still stands, known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Haram esh-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary). One portion of this platform—the Western, or Wailing, Wall—is especially venerated by Jews, who make pilgrimages to the site to pray. The wall has also become an architectural, as well as a religious icon, and its form is frequently referred to in contemporary synagogue design.

Since the destruction of the Second Temple, the synagogue has been the only truly Jewish contribution to world architecture. The synagogue, however, has been understood by most Jews over the centuries as a temporary replacement of the Temple. The Temple's "temporal architecture" has been translated to the synagogue, where prayer has replaced sacrifice.² But the synagogue has never been defined in architectural terms. A synagogue (from the Greek synagein, "to bring together") requires only an enclosed space to allow a congregation to assemble for worship and to hear the reading of the Torah (Five Books of Moses).³

The two most important elements of the interior of every synagogue are the aron ha-kodesh (Ark), which houses the Torah scrolls, and the bimah, or platform, from where the Torah is read aloud to the congregation. The prayer service creates a dynamic relationship between these elements. The synagogue must also include seating for the congregation and space for ceremonial processions, particularly when the Torah is taken from and returned to the Ark. Good sight lines and sufficient illumination, preferably by natural light, are desired.

Seating can be arranged in many ways, though in Orthodox synagogues separate seating is required for women. This is often provided in a gallery, a solution used in 1675 in the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, which subsequently influenced the first American synagogues. Smaller spaces, however, can use any sort of barrier (mehizah) to divide women's and men's sections.⁴

The Jewish liturgy combines the regular and ordered reading and explanation of the Written Law, or Torah, to the community with prayers from the community to God. The Torah scroll, which contains the words

Opposite: Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, New York. Stained-glass window by Ben Shahn, filling the wall behind the Ark and depicting Creation.
of God, is the holiest object in Jewish life. The Ark and bimah, because they are essential to the reading of the Torah and because they come in regular contact with the scroll, are the holiest parts of a synagogue.

Thus, the design of the Ark and bimah is given great attention by synagogue architects. The Ark is the central focus of the synagogue space. In the earliest synagogues, the Torah scrolls were kept in movable chests, which may have also served as readers' tables. These early Arks clearly related to the Holy Ark that was crafted by Bezalel and housed in the Tabernacle, erected under God's command in the wilderness of Sinai and described in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 32:1–5, 37:1–9). But soon it became accepted practice to place the Ark against the wall that faces Jerusalem. Though seating arrangements vary, worshippers almost always face the Ark (and hence Jerusalem) while praying.

By the late Roman and Byzantine periods (fifth through eighth centuries) apses and other architectural devices focused attention on the Ark. Numerous illustrations survive from the European Middle Ages showing the Ark as ornate, freestanding cabinet. Building the Ark directly into the synagogue wall and elevating it a few steps above the main floor of the sanctuary became common by the sixteenth century.

The Ark is traditionally rectangular and made of wood, but it can be any size, shape, or material. In the twentieth century, artists and architects experimented with new materials, including glass and metal, and new shapes for the Ark. Some modern artists have created entirely original designs, but others have been inspired by the biblical description of Bezalel’s Ark and other sources. The bimah can be a simple table, but it is usually more elaborate raised platform with a table, sometimes covered by a canopy of fabric, metal, or wood. The synagogue can contain other elements, too. These include decorative and symbolic lights, including an eternal light (Ner tamid) that stands before the Ark, and menorahs (seven-branched candelabra that recall the Menorah in the Jerusalem Temple).

Over time, a series of liturgical, architectural, and artistic solutions centered on the Ark and bimah have been adopted, creating arrangements that are immediately recognizable and quintessentially Jewish. Three basic spatial patterns dominate. In the Sephardic tradition, Ark and bimah are often placed at opposite ends of the room, and the congregation faces the axis between them. Congregants turn their heads from one to the other, as if the two furnishings were in dialogue. This is the form adopted by the earliest American congregations and still found at the established synagogues of congregations such as New York’s Shearith Israel and Philadelphia’s Mikveh Israel.

In traditional Ashkenazic (German and East European) synagogues the bimah is usually more centrally placed. The Torah reader—but not the rest of the congregation—maintains the dialogue with the Ark. In synagogues built on a centralized plan, such as the wooden synagogues in Poland, the centrally placed bimah creates a dynamic where the congregation encircles the reader. This tradition was preferred in the United States by most Eastern European immigrants in their first Orthodox congregations. The central bimah has remained essential in subsequent Orthodox synagogues, and has recently been revived in some Conservative synagogues, too, as in Congregation Agudath Achim in Austin, Texas.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Reform Jews moved the bimah to the front of the Congregation immediately before the Ark, often creating a stagelike platform. The result is a more hierarchical arrangement that lends increased “decorum,” which many nineteenth-century European and American Jews sought. In the twentieth century Conservative congregations also mostly moved the bimah up front. The inclusion or adaptation of this arrangement continues to challenge architects of American synagogues today.

History of European Synagogues
The early rabbis who compiled the Talmud, the legal foundation of post-Temple Judaism, related the then new institution of the synagogue to the prophet Ezekiel’s description of “lesser sanctuaries” that are temporary replacements for the Temple. In the post-Temple period, however, Jews have lavished attention on synagogues when opportunity allowed. The size and architecture of many synagogues are intended to suggest permanence, even though the facts of Jewish history have instead made most synagogues temporary. Centuries of oppression in Europe and prosperity in the United States have both led to the abandonment and destruction of thousands of synagogues.
Synagogues did not replace the Jewish Temple—the locus of Jewish worship in antiquity. The functions of the Temple and the synagogue are fundamentally different—ritual sacrifice for the former, prayer for the latter. Thus, the architecture of the synagogue also differs from the Temple. In the nineteenth century, many Reform Jews in Europe and the United States rejected Jewish yearning for a return to Israel in the time of the Messiah, and chose to identify more fully with their Diaspora homelands. Consequently, they began to call their modern synagogues “temples”—though imitation of the ancient Jerusalem cult was not intended, these synagogues were often big, prominent, and lavishly decorated.

There have developed over a long period of time, however, certain parallels between Temple and synagogue, many of which are encoded into the liturgy. Prayer services at synagogue correlate to the times of offering at the Temple, and the separation of men and women in Orthodox synagogues derives from Temple regulations. Other relations are symbolic: physical reminders of the standing Temple, such as the incorporation of two columns or turrets, which may represent the brazen columns from Solomon’s Temple described in the book of Kings and named, for still unknown reasons, Jachin and Boaz; the covering of the Ark with a curtain recalls the veil of the Holy of Holies. There are sometimes reminders of the Temple’s destruction, such as part of a wall left unplastered when synagogues are built. Associations exist, too, between the synagogue’s Ark (aron ha-kodesh) and the Ark of the Covenant (aron ha-birit), which Solomon placed in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Though the two Arks (the Hebrew word means “chest”) have very different functions—one is where God resided, and the other is where the Torah, or Word of God, is housed—they are linked in most Jews’ minds. Some architects and artists, such as Philip Trammel Shutze at Atlanta’s Temple, have emphasized this connection.

Early on in the history of the Diaspora, the multipurpose synagogue became the center of Jewish life and community identity. Since antiquity synagogues have been frequently used for community assemblies and legal proceedings, and as religious study houses. Synagogues were, until recently, the focus of most Jewish artistic endeavors because broader cultural and artistic expression was forbidden or at least discouraged by the laws of the cultural majority as well as by Jewish law and tradition. In Europe, community synagogues did not stand in isolation. They were often surrounded by a host of communal buildings including a rabbi’s house, a communal office, a social hall, school, and mikveh (ritual bath). In modern times a Jewish community may also operate a hospital, a nursing home, and other social welfare facilities. These are not, however, distinctly Jewish in character, although they sometimes contain a small synagogue for use by residents or patients. In the United States, Jews are free to choose their religious institutions, to congregate as they please, and there are no official Jewish communities requiring registration and taxation. Synagogues are founded by like-minded congregants who define their own religious identity. Thus, most American synagogues prior to 1900 consisted of only a building for prayer. The Jewish community used other facilities to meet their various needs.

Increasingly, congregations have added non-worship facilities such as schools, libraries, offices, kitchens, social halls, gymnasiums, and so on, to their synagogues to attract and serve their members. The result is the “synagogue center,” which takes on the multifunctional role of the ancient synagogue. The need for the synagogue center increased as the cohesion of Jewish neighborhoods declined.

Throughout the world, until the nineteenth century, by choice or circumstance, Jewish structures only occasionally rivaled Christian or civic architecture in size or decoration. There was no state or royal sponsorship and no extensive land holdings to finance construction. Laws promulgated by Christian and Muslim rulers limited the size and appearance of synagogues. Nonetheless, given the opportunity to build, Jews often did so. In the American colonies Jewish communities were able to afford attractive buildings, but the small size of early congregations made large buildings unnecessary, and sensitivity to their own history and to the cultural mores of the surrounding society compelled congregations to avoid ostentatious displays.

Not all synagogues, however, are architecturally distinctive. Many Jewish congregations, especially when new and poor, have merely adapted existing spaces with few changes. Most American Jewish congregations began in rented rooms above a store, in a private house, or in an unused Protestant church, and this process continues today.
Interior Plans

Interior plans for synagogues take many forms. The basilica plan—with a wide central aisle often terminating in a projecting apse and narrower side aisles—has been popular. It is inherited from Roman architecture and is also used for Christian churches. Multi-aisle synagogues were common in antiquity and in medieval Spain. The basilica's side aisles could be curtained off for women, but its decidedly longitudinal and hierarchical form was not well suited for traditional Jewish worship.

The hall plan, which is simply an open, usually rectangular room with no columnar obstructions, is often preferred, especially for smaller congregations. Hall plans are usually of modest dimensions because of the structural limitations of roof spans. Private synagogues, often attached to or within a patron's house, took this form. The interior spaces of hall-plan synagogues are often exceptionally tall, with space to insert galleries for women along two or three sides of the room. Upper galleries maximized the seating capacity and created a theatrical atmosphere, which has often been heightened by the application of rich decoration throughout, as in Italian synagogues from the sixteenth century and later. The verticality of hall-plan interiors is often wholly unexpected from the outside.

In medieval Germany and Central Europe a double-nave consisting of a vaulted space divided into two equal aisles by a central row of columns or piers, was frequently adopted. This had the symbolic advantage of being quite distinct from a medieval church, but it was inadequate because the columns obstructed sight lines to the Ark, which was on the same axis. To minimize this problem the entrances were placed at oblique angles to the Ark, and benches were set around the periphery of the space to allow broad sight lines. The worshipers faced the central bimah more than the Ark.

The use of lighter wood construction and of improved masonry vaulting after the sixteenth century allowed the development of broader, loftier interiors. In Poland a new vaulted hall type created some of the most magnificent synagogue interiors ever built. The central plan, wide-open space, and high ceiling also encouraged the development of increasingly ornate bimahs, which often copied in smaller form the plan of the synagogue. The Polish wooden synagogues, all destroyed during World War II, were the highest expression of this type of design.

In the nineteenth century, Reform congregations developed a new form of interior articulation that closely followed traditional church architecture. This arrangement has come to dominate American synagogue design. Reformers adopted more "propriety" in the worship service, with less spontaneous prayer, and more united responses. Synagogues were arranged more for performers (clergy) and audience (congregation) than for prayer leaders and participants. Some older synagogues also had this arrangement, but on a smaller scale. The bimah was moved from the center of the space to immediately in front of or to the side of the Ark. A single set of steps now led to the enlarged platform, and all ritual and reading was centralized on this single space. Pulpits were also added, since preaching and sermons by rabbis, often in the vernacular language or in German, became an important part of the public service. Galleries continued in use in this type of building, sometimes rising in two levels. In Europe separate seating for men and women was maintained in many Reform synagogues, and mixed seating was only gradually adopted.

In much of Central and Eastern Europe, separate space for female congregants had usually been in annexes, connected to the main space of these hall-plan synagogues with small windows. Galleries in the sanctuaries began to be designed around 1600. By the eighteenth century, in buildings such as the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, upper-level galleries for women wrapped around three sides of the space. This arrangement, always popular in urban areas because it allowed maximum seating in a limited area, was until recently particularly popular in synagogues in the United States.

Adequate seating for women in the American synagogue has not been a high concern for architects, since the majority of synagogues they designed in the twentieth century were for Reform or Conservative congregations, which allow mixed seating. Most Orthodox synagogues of the nineteenth century, such as Shearith Israel in New York, had galleries. The growth of congregations, the increased demand for seating space, and the often restricted space available for building new urban synagogues, had combined to keep galleries essential for most Orthodox and Reform congregations, despite their shortcomings. In 1909, however, William Tachau designed a new synagogue for the venerated
Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, which as an Orthodox Sephardic synagogue maintained the separation of the sexes. Describing his design, Tschau wrote:

Here it was decided that it was too much of a physical hardship for the women to climb to a high gallery, so the old idea of stationing the women's section near the ground level was revived. It is arranged on either side of the building, and can easily be reached by a few steps leading from the common vestibule, which lies in front of the hall of worship.\(^8\)

This innovation was used much later in the design of the Orthodox Sons of Israel in Lakewood, New Jersey.

Synagogue Decoration

Synagogues have always been decorated. We know from archaeological excavations that even the ancient synagogues had elaborate floor mosaics, and at least some had wall paintings. Some of these decorations were geometric and filled with inscriptions. Others included symbolic and decorative devices common in ancient art that derived directly from pagan religious sources. In the wall paintings at Dura Europas (third century) and the floor mosaics at Beth Alpha (sixth century), artists depicted human figures as part of narrative action. Most of these decorations were unknown until the twentieth century but their rediscovery greatly influenced the design and decoration of modern synagogues.

Medieval responsa (the written opinions of rabbis in response to thorny questions of Jewish law and practice) discuss the type of decoration allowed in synagogues. Surviving fragments and pre-World War II photographs demonstrate how lavish and how fanciful such decoration could be.

Synagogues have long contained richly decorated textiles and elaborately carved and painted arks and bimahs. Stained glass was used in congregations that agreed to its appropriateness. In Muslim countries brightly colored tiles and ornate stuccowork decorate synagogues while following the proscriptions against representation art in Islam. In all cases, Hebrew calligraphy, used for dedicatory inscriptions, inspirational biblical passages, or the transcription of whole prayers, also served as decoration. This tradition has been continued in modern American synagogues. One of the most exceptional examples of calligraphic art was created by Sigmund Wolpert at Sons of Israel in Lakewood, New Jersey. Inscriptions also play important instructional and aesthetic roles at Norman Jaffe's Jewish Center of the Hamptons in East Hampton, New York, and at Alexander Gorlin's North Shore Hebrew Academy Synagogue in King's Point, New York.

The Second Commandment has often been cited as a prohibition against art in Judaism, including synagogue decoration, based on an extremely narrow interpretation of the passage in Deuteronomy 5:8–9, that reads, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness... You shall not bow down to them or serve them."\(^9\) Too often the commandment has been understood as a restriction of art, rather than a prohibition of idolatry.\(^10\) Evidence from other scriptural passages, especially the descriptions of the building of the Tabernacle, and later of the Temple in Jerusalem show that artistic expression was an accepted part of the Jewish religious experience. Exodus 15:2, "This is my God and I will glorify Him," has generated the concept of "Beauty in Holiness," which encourages the elaboration of places and objects that facilitate worship of God and the teaching of God's laws. The physical evidence of past synagogues and Jewish ritual objects supports this view.

Modern rabbis, especially Reform rabbis, have championed art in the synagogue, including figural art of an explicit nature not known since the frescoes were painted at the synagogue of Dura Europas. Rabbi Edgar Magnin of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles enthusiastically supported the painted frieze in that synagogue that narrates Jewish history. Rabbi Philip Bernstein of B'rith Kodesh in Rochester defended the bronze Ark in that synagogue that represents in expressive, but clearly figural, form, scriptural accounts of patriarchs' and prophets' encounters with God. Modern artists who have created work for synagogues, such as Abraham Rattner, Ibram Lassow, and Louise Nevelson, often use less explicit, abstract forms to tell the story of creation or to represent various attributes of God or Jewish virtues.