

Judaism

History, Belief and Practice

Dan Cohn-Sherbok

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CHAPTER 75

Places of Worship

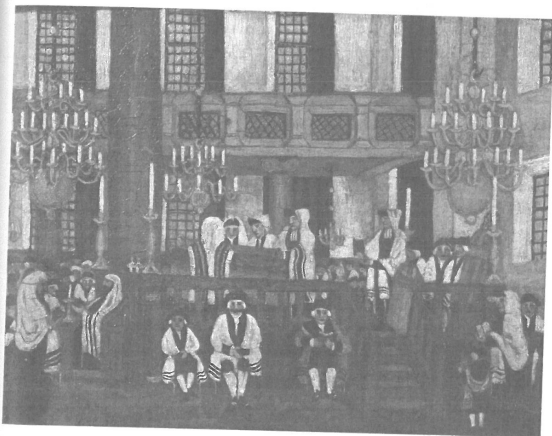


Figure 75 Interior of synagogue. Artist: Polak, K.J. Copyright The Art Archive/Israel Museum Jerusalem/Dagil Orti.

Scripture relates that Moses made a portable shrine (sanctuary) following God's instructions (Exodus Chapters 25-7). This structure travelled with the Israelites in the desert and it was placed in the centre of the camp in an open courtyard 1,000 cubits by 50 cubits in size. The fence surrounding it consisted of wooden pillars from which a cloth curtain was

suspended. Located in the eastern half of the courtyard, the sanctuary measured 30 cubits by 10 cubits. At its end stood the Holy of Holies, which was separated by a veil hanging on five wooden pillars on which were woven images of the cherubim. Inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant, the table on which the shewbread was placed, the incense altar, and the

Purim

The Book of Esther describes Purim as a commemoration of the defeat of Haman:

The rest of the Jews, those in the king's provinces, likewise mustered and fought for their lives . . . That was on the thirteenth day of the month of *Adar*, and they rested on the fourteenth day and made it a day of feasting and merrymaking.

(Esther 9:16–19)

Tishah B'Av

Tishah B'Av is a day of mourning commemorating tragic events in the history of the Jewish people:

Tishah B'Av (the 9th of *Av*) has been a traditional day of mourning which commemorates major tragic events of the past – the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE and of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, and the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Tradition has assigned additional subsequent major tragedies to the ninth of *Av*. The day's special liturgy which has developed from the Biblical book of Lamentations recalls the pain and suffering of the Jewish people.

(In GP: NUPB, p. 103)

DISCUSSION

1. In what ways does the Jewish spiritual year commence with *Rosh Ha-Shanah* in the seventh month of *Tishri*?
2. How does the traditional belief in the year of creation in 3761 BCE conflict with a scientific understanding of the origin of the universe?

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menorah (candelabrum). In the courtyard there was also an outer altar on which sacrifices were offered, as well as a brass laver for priests.

Eventually this structure was superseded by the Temple, which was built by Solomon in Jerusalem in the tenth century BCE. Standing within a royal compound which also consisted of the palace, a Hall of Judgement, the Hall of Cedars, and a house for Solomon's wife, the Temple was 60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high. The main part of the Temple was surrounded by a three-storey building divided into chambers with storeys connected by trapdoors – these were probably storerooms for the Temple treasures. The main building consisted of an inner room – the Holy of Holies – on the west, and an outer room measuring 20 by 40 cubits on the east. Around the Temple was a walled-in compound. At the entrance to the Temple stood two massive bronze pillars (Jachin and Boaz).

Within the Holy of Holies stood the Ark which contained the Two Tablets of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments. In the outer room stood an incense altar, the table for the shewbread, and ten lampstands made of gold. In front of the Temple stood a bronze basin supported by twelve bronze cattle. A bronze altar also stood in the courtyard, which was used for various sacrifices.

From the time of Solomon's reign, the Temple served as the site for prayer and the offering of sacrifices to God. In addition to the communal sacrifices made daily, there were communal sacrifices offered on the Sabbath, festivals, and the New Moon. The Temple was also the site to which the *Omer* (the first barley measure harvested on the second day of Passover) and the first fruits were brought on *Shavuot*. On Passover all families were required to come to Jerusalem to offer the paschal sacrifice. In the sixth century BCE, however, the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians when they invaded the country. After the exile in the sixth century BCE, Jews in Babylonia established a new institution for public worship – the *synagogue* (meaning 'assembly' in Greek). There they came together to study and pray. On their return to Jerusalem in the latter part of the sixth century BCE, the Jewish populace continued to gather in synagogues as well as offer sacrifice in the Temple. Thus the synagogue developed alongside the Second Temple.

In the synagogue itself, there are a number of elements which parallel the ancient Tabernacle and the Temple. First, there is the Holy Ark – this is symbolic of the Holy of Holies, the most important part of the Sanctuary and the Temple. The Ark itself is located on the wall which faces toward Jerusalem so that Jews are able to pray in the direction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Second, the eternal light hangs before the Ark – this represents the lamp which burned continually in the Sanctuary. The third major element in the synagogue is the Torah (Five Books of Moses) which are placed in the Ark. The Torah is written in Hebrew by a scribe who uses a special ink on parchment. A breastplate covers the Torah, and over it hangs a pointer which is used for the chanting or recitation of the Torah. There are two rollers on which the Torah Scroll is wrapped. In addition, various ornaments, usually in silver, adorn the Scroll: these are symbolic of the ornaments of the High Priest in Temple times. A fourth feature of the synagogue is the platform (or *bimah*) which was in previous times used only for the reading of the Law and the Prophets, as well as for rabbinical sermons. Finally, there is a separation between men and women, usually in the form of a balcony where women are seated during the service.

According to tradition, there were about 400 synagogues in Jerusalem when the Second Temple was destroyed. Although this figure may be exaggerated, there is considerable evidence of synagogue building in the Jewish world during the Second Temple period. The earliest concrete evidence comes from Egypt in the third century BCE; two centuries later the Jewish philosopher Philo referred to the presence of synagogues in Rome. In addition, the Book of Acts mentions Paul's presence in synagogues in Damascus, Asia Minor and Cyprus. By the fifth century CE it was widely attested that wherever Jews lived, they built structures which became the focus of Jewish life and thought. Unlike the Temple, where ritual was carried out exclusively by priests, the only requirement for synagogue worship was the presence of a quorum (*minyan*) of ten men – any service could be led by a lay person. This shift away from Temple hierarchy marked a fundamental democratization of Jewish life. Both *halakic* and *aggadic* sources testify to the importance of this institution: all synagogues were perceived as partaking of the holiness of the Temple. For this reason

it became customary for men to cover their heads when worshipping in the synagogue.

From the third to the eighth century CE, over 100 synagogues existed in Israel, largely in Galilee. In general they followed several prototypes: the most common was the basilica form which consisted of a long hall divided by two rows of pillars into a central nave and two aisles. During this period it does not appear that there was a separate seating area for women. These buildings were impressive structures which dominated the surrounding Jewish settlement – frequently they were located at the highest point in a town or near a source of water. The interiors were usually unadorned so that worshippers would not be distracted from prayer. At a certain stage, mosaic floors were introduced which contained geometrical designs and later depictions of Biblical stories, as well as mythological figures drawn from the surrounding cultures.

In the Middle Ages the synagogue dominated Jewish life. In most communities it was located at the centre of the Jewish quarter. Three times a day men attended services, and frequently the local rabbinic court convened there. Classes took place in the sanctuary or in an annexe, and oaths as well as bans of excommunication were pronounced in its environs. In addition, communal offices, the ritual bath, a library, a hospice for travellers and a social hall were located in synagogue rooms or adjacent buildings. Throughout this period synagogue architecture was influenced by

Romanesque and Gothic styles, and special sections for women became common. The readers' platform in the centre of the building together with the Ark served as the focal points for the structure. Because synagogues were not permitted to be higher than neighbouring churches, many European synagogues were built with the floors below street level to maximize their height.

In the early modern period synagogues were constructed in western European ghettos (such as Venice); in Poland wooden synagogues influenced synagogue architecture throughout eastern Europe. In Muslim countries synagogues were modest in scale in accordance with Muslim law. From the nineteenth century, however, major innovations were introduced by reformers. Influenced by church architecture, Reform synagogues (temples) were large, imposing buildings containing organs. The section for women was abolished, and decorum during the service was emphasized. Head coverings and prayer shawls for men were also abandoned, although they have in recent years reappeared, and the reader's platform was shifted from the centre to the area in front of the Ark. Yet despite such changes Reform temples, together with Orthodox synagogues, have reassumed the role of the social centre. Both generally contain social halls used for a wide variety of activities, classrooms for religious schooling, and offices for administrative staff. Thus, no matter what their form, synagogues continue to dominate Jewish life and serve as the religious focus of the community in contemporary society.

SOURCES

Temple

Despite God's determination to destroy the Temple, He expressed regret for this action:

In the hour when God determined to destroy the Temple, He said, 'So long as I was in its midst, the nations could not touch it; now I will hide my eyes from it, and I will swear that I will not connect myself with it until the end; then the enemy can come and destroy it.' At once God swore with his right hand, and drew it back, as it is said, 'He drew back his right hand on account of the enemy' (Lam. 2:3). Then the enemy entered the Temple and burnt it. When it was

burnt, God said, 'Now I have no dwelling-place in the land; I will withdraw my *Shekhinah* from it, and ascend to my former place', as it is said, 'I will go and return to my place till they acknowledge their sins' (Hosea 5:15). Then the Lord wept, and said, 'Woe is me, what have I done? I caused my *Shekhinah* to descend because of Israel, and now that they have sinned, I have returned to my former place. Far be it from me that I should be a laughing

stock to the nations and a scorn to men.' Then *Metatron* came, and fell on his face, and said, 'I will work, but thou must not weep'. Then God said, 'If thou sufferest me not to weep, I will go to a place where thou hast no power to enter, and I will weep there', as it is said, 'My soul shall weep in secret places' (Jer. 13:7). Then God said to the angels of the service, 'Come, we will go, you and I, and we will see what the enemy has done to my house.' So God and the angels of the service set forth, and Jeremiah went in front of them. When God saw the Temple, He said, 'Assuredly, that is my house, and that is my place of rest, into which the enemy has come and worked his will.' Then God wept and said, 'Woe is me for my house. Where are you, my sons? Where are you, my priests? Where are you, my friends? What can I do to you? I warned you, but you did not repent.' Then God said to Jeremiah, 'I am today like a man who had an only son, and he set up for him the marriage canopy, and he died under it. Do you not grieve for me and my sons? Go, call Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses from their graves, for they know how to weep.' Then Jeremiah said, 'I do not know where Moses is buried.' God said, 'Go to the border of the Jordan, and lift up your voice and cry: 'Son of Amram, stand up, and see how the enemy has devoured your flock.' So Jeremiah went

to the cave of Macpelah, and he said to the patriarchs, 'Arise, for the time has come when you are summoned before God'. They said, 'Why?' He replied 'I know not', because he was afraid lest they should say, 'So it is in your days that this evil has befallen our sons.' Then Jeremiah went, and stood by the border of Jordan, and cried, 'Son of Amram, arise, the time has come that you are summoned before God.' He said, 'Why is it today more than on other days that I am summoned before God?' Jeremiah replied, 'I do not know.' Then Moses left Jeremiah, and went to the angels of the service, for he knew them ever since the giving of the Law. He said to them, 'You ministers of God on high, do you know at all why I am summoned before God?' They said, 'Do you not know that the Temple is laid waste, and Israel driven into exile?' Then Moses cried and wept till he came to the patriarchs. Then they, too, rent their clothes, and they laid their hands on their heads, and they wept and cried till they came to the gates of the Temple. When God saw them, He 'called to weeping and to mourning and to baldness and to girding with sackcloth' (Isa. 22:12) . . . Then they all went weeping from one gate of the Temple to another, as a man whose dead lies before him. And God mourned.

(*Lam. R.*, Introduction 24, f. 6b in RA, p. 68)

Synagogue

God's presence was manifest in the synagogue as He was in the ancient Temple:

'My love is like a gazelle' (Song of Songs. 2:9). As the gazelle leaps from place to place, and from fence to fence, and from tree to tree, so God jumps and leaps from synagogue to synagogue to bless the children of Israel.

(*Numbers R.*, *Naso*, 11:2 in RA, p. 18)

Modern Synagogue

Modern Jews continue to worship in the synagogue as they did in past ages. Across the religious spectrum – from Orthodox Judaism to Reform – the synagogue continues to be the spiritual centre of Jewish life:

In the liturgy of the synagogue the Jewish people has written its spiritual autobiography. For a score of centuries each generation has, in turn, added its own distinctive chapter to this book, which contains memories of time past and promises for the future, praise and

lamentation, ethical teaching, and mystical vision. A people possessed by its God is the author of this book.

We are that people still. There are divisions among us; some are matters of principle and others relate to style. And yet, at root, we remain united in our yearning for transcendence, in our hope for peace and human friendship. All of us, in our reflective moments continue to look beneath the surface of our lives, hoping for light, strength, eternal – or at least durable – purpose. Our people's modes of worship are many and various, but we are at one in attempting through worship to express our deepest selves.

Worship is more than an act of cognition; it is a turning of the whole being toward that which we affirm as ultimately real and valuable. Humble in the face of a spiritual reality whose essence we cannot 'know', we speak in metaphors. Our 'truth' is a truth of the heart not less than of the mind. The 'facts' we assert are those of the hopeful spirit. But we believe that the spiritual reality within us corresponds to a spiritual Reality beyond us, and in worship we hope to bring the two realities into communion.

(In GP: NUPB, p. xi)

DISCUSSION

1. How does the synagogue reflect the ancient Temple in Jerusalem?
2. Compare and contrast the traditional synagogue with Reform temples.

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