

CHAPTER I — *The Architecture of the Synagogue*

(a) Structure

In Talmudic times the synagogue was generally built on top of a hill and was consequently the tallest building in the city. This was similar to the Temple which was on a hill and such a site created greater honor for the house of worship. Today with the advent of skyscrapers, it has become impossible for the synagogue to be the tallest building and so to enhance its dignity, the structure as well as its interior is beautified. The aron hakodesh is placed along the mizrach (eastern) wall, while the doors of the synagogue are to the rear (the west), so that upon entering one faces the ark and Jerusalem. Before entering the main sanctuary there is a vestibule with doors leading into the synagogue. This arrangement is symbolic of the Temple with its many rooms, and also affords a person the opportunity to prepare himself to enter the synagogue with proper respect. The pews are arranged so that the entire congregation faces the ark and the direction of Israel, while the rabbi and elders are seated up front on chairs facing the congregation. In most congregations the rabbi is seated to the right of the ark while in some the rabbi sits on the left. While in the Ashkenazic synagogue pews are set up also between the amud and bimah, in the Sephardic congregations there are none in this area so that one does not turn his back to the Torah during the reading of the Torah.

(b) Windows and Paintings

To inspire concentration in prayer and to add light and dignity to the synagogue twelve windows are constructed around the synagogue. The number twelve was chosen as symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel, thus indicating that the prayer of each tribe is accepted through a special window in heaven. Generally windows have panels, and each panel may be considered as a window. As a result every synagogue has a minimum of twelve windows. The windows in the eastern wall focus our attention on Jerusalem and the Beis Hamikdash while the others inspire our thoughts by enabling us to see the sky. The windows are generally constructed above the head level.

Synagogues are beautified with wall paintings and stained glass windows which depict religious sites such as the Kosel Hamaaravi, the Tomb of Rachel, the twelve tribes of Israel etc., and with inscriptions of various verses. The ritual objects are also beautified. The aron hakodesh for example, has the ten commandments on two tablets guarded by two lions. The poroches and mantle are embroidered with lions and a mogen david. Trees and flowers are also common outside many synagogues.