

(b) The Poroches — Curtain

As noted in the previous section a poroches is placed on the aron hakodesh. Among Ashkenazic Jews it is customary to place it on the outside of the aron, for it is symbolic of the poroches of the Beis Hamikdosh where the poroches separated the "kodesh kodoshim" where the aron hakodesh was kept, from the rest of the Temple. In addition, the aron was covered with a poroches when the mishkan traveled. Among some Sephardic Jews the poroches is found inside the aron hakodesh. The poroches is generally of a blue-purple color, similar to the color of the poroches of the Beis Hamikdosh. Often it has a crown embroidered on it symbolizing the majesty of the Torah in Jewish life. During the High Holidays, a white poroches is used as a symbol of purity and forgiveness. Since the poroches serves the ark rather than the Torah it is one step lower than the aron hakodesh in terms of kedusha. Therefore while the aron hakodesh is categorized as "tashmishei kedusha" (it serves a holy object and requires burial when it cannot be used), the poroches is only classed as synagogue furniture which may not be destroyed, but does not require burial. In talmudic times the poroches was occasionally used to cover the shulchan when the Torah was read. When used in this manner it was classified in the same category as the ark and required burial. Today the poroches is used only for the ark, while for the shulchan there is a special cover.

(c) The Bimah and Amud

In the center of the synagogue there is a raised platform or "bimah" with a table or "shulchan," upon which the Torah is read. The shulchan is slanted so that the reader may see the top lines of the scroll without difficulty. Generally there are from three to six steps leading up to the bimah which is enclosed by a railing. The bimah faces the aron hakodesh. Just as the bimah from which the king read the Torah in the Beis Hamikdosh was made of wood so, too, are our bimas today.

The importance of having the bimah in the center is three-fold; it enables the congregation to hear the Torah reading clearly; it symbolizes Mt. Sinai which was surrounded by the Jewish people (this also explains the elevation of the bimah); it is symbolic of the mizbayach (alter) which was at the center of the Temple. On the holiday of Succos the kohanim circled the mizbayach with esrogim and lulavim. So, too, we circle the bimah with esrog and lulav. In some Sephardic synagogues the bimah is located near the rear while in small synagogues where the bimah would reduce the seating capacity drastically the bimah is placed near the front.