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Preserving American Jewish History

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

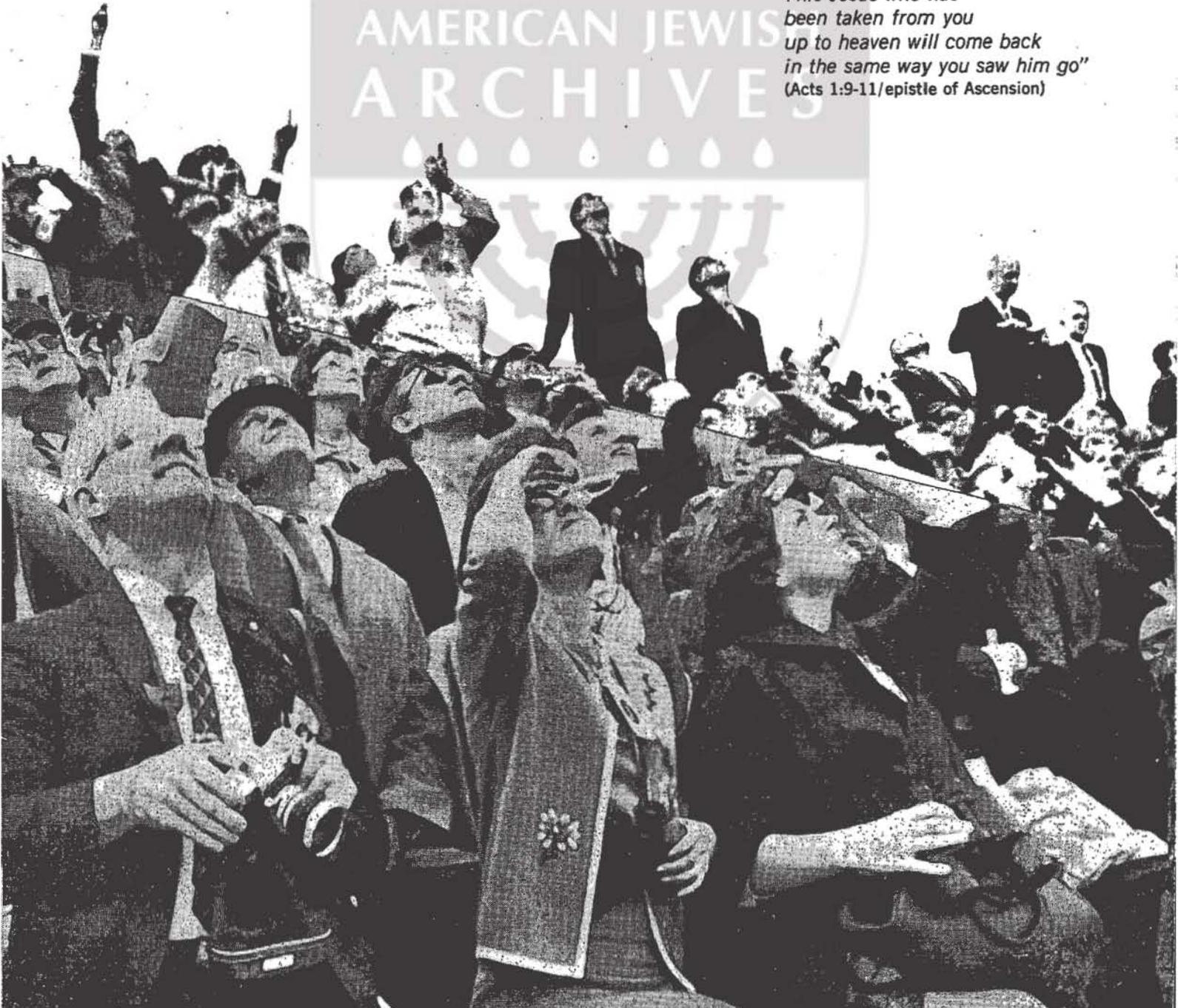
Box 1, Folder 42, "This is the Synagogue", 15 May 1966.



W I T N E S S

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*He was lifted up
before their very eyes,
and a cloud took him
from their sight.
They were staring
after him into the sky when
two men dressed in white
stood beside them.
"Men of Galilee," they said,
"Why do you stand here
looking at the sky?
This Jesus who has
been taken from you
up to heaven will come back
in the same way you saw him go"
(Acts 1:9-11/epistle of Ascension)*



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IN THIS ISSUE...

"There is an appointed time for everything ... A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to uproot. A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to be silent, and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).

Ecclesiastes might have added: A time to work, and a time to play. Even during vacation time, you grow and learn and build yourself up—even while having fun—so that by fall, you are more of a person than you were in spring. Some ideas that may help you have a more profitable and fun summer are suggested by other WITNESS readers in REACT on page 6.

This is the time of the year when you find out just how much you are growing in knowledge. Part of that knowledge has to be centered on Christ and on life. On page 7 are reviewed a few of the main features in WITNESS this year and asked are a few "think" questions. Give them a good try.

From the gospel we know that Jesus attended the synagogue and also taught there. Saint Paul regularly preached in the synagogues of cities he visited in his journeys. More, the early Christians patterned their worship on the synagogue service to which was added the celebration of the Eucharist. Essentially, this is the form of the Mass even today. The synagogue of today has changed little since the time of Jesus in its expression of worship. You might better appreciate your own way of worship by better understanding the synagogue. Beginning on this page, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, director of the Inter-religious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee, conducts a tour of New York's Central Synagogue. He invites you to join him.

It might be good to recall here the words of Vatican Council II's recent declaration relating to the Jews: "...The Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets..."

"Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred (Council) wants to foster and recommend...mutual understanding and respect..."

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THIS IS THE SYNAGOGUE

Have you ever visited a synagogue? If not, join us as we visit New York's historic Central Synagogue in the Bronx. With me are Mother Katherine Marie, principal of Saint Philip Neri Catholic School, and a group of her seventh and eighth graders. I am Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee.

After the tour, you might appreciate better the way your Jewish friends worship, even your own Christian worship that has its roots in Judaism. But before we begin, let me explain a little of the history of the synagogue.

The synagogue is the most important religious institution of the Jewish people. For the last 2500 years—perhaps even longer—it has served Judaism as a "house of prayer," "a house of study," and "a house of assembly." The synagogue owes its beginnings to the Holy Temple that King Solomon built on Mount Zion in ancient Palestine almost 3000 years ago. As we know from the Bible, the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of the religious life of the Jewish people. Each day—morning and afternoon—sacrifices were offered to God



BY RABBI MARC TANENBAUM

upon its altar under the supervision of its priests, descendants of the High Priest Aaron.

When the Babylonian armies conquered Palestine in 586 B.C., they destroyed the Temple and carried large numbers of the Jews into exile. During this Babylonian captivity, under the inspiration of the prophet Ezekiel, the synagogue came into being. Sacrifices were no longer possible; prayer, therefore, was substituted as *avodah she-balev*, as a "service of the heart." At first the synagogue required no special building nor fixed place; whenever a quorum (*minyan* in Hebrew) of 10 men came together, they formed a congregation and were permitted to pray and study. On the Sabbath, the holy seventh day of rest, the Jews assembled in their homes and read to each other from the Torah; the parchment scrolls containing the sacred Five Books of Moses—*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*. Then they read from the writings of the prophets. Afterward, one member of the *minyan*—qualified by intelligence and education—would interpret the

meaning of these sacred texts by commentary and parables. Modeling their services after the Temple ritual, prayers were said twice daily—in the morning and in the afternoon. Later, a service at sunset was added.

The Temple of Jerusalem was held in such reverence that, upon its destruction, the Jewish people sought to keep alive reverence for its supreme sanctity; but they refused to try to convert the synagogue into a substitute for the holy Temple—although today numerous Jewish houses of worship call themselves "temples." Prayer services are conducted by the congregation which sees itself as the community of God participating in common worship and common study of the Word of God. Any member of the congregation educated in the Jewish tradition is qualified to lead the congregation in prayer. The *rabbi* (based on a Hebrew word meaning "teacher") is a "teaching elder"; his influence with the congregation is based on his knowledge of the Torah.

As evidence of how strong a link Jews continue to keep with the Tem-

ple tradition, each synagogue is oriented in the direction of Jerusalem. Some of the furnishings in the synagogue are similar—but not identical—to those of the Temple. Since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, there has been no Jewish priesthood. There is no altar because there can be no sacrifices outside of the Temple. Instead, there is a pulpit or a reader's stand for the Torah facing the congregation.

Writing in the newly-published book, *Torah and Gospel*, Father Aidan Kavanagh, a distinguished Benedictine professor of liturgy and sacramental theology, points out that the early Christian community in Palestine—this would include Jesus, the Apostles and many of the disciples—worshiped in synagogues. He says too that Christian liturgy was deeply influenced by the form and content of the "personalized" worship of the synagogue. "This worship," writes Father Kavanagh, "consisted in meditative reading of the Law and prophets; together with the 'sacrifice of praise' uttered by the lips and hearts of men in psalm and in the blessing-thanksgiving form of prayer, the *berachah*." He adds that the Fore-Mass of Catholic liturgy "owes so much" to this form of prayer that originated in the synagogue liturgy.

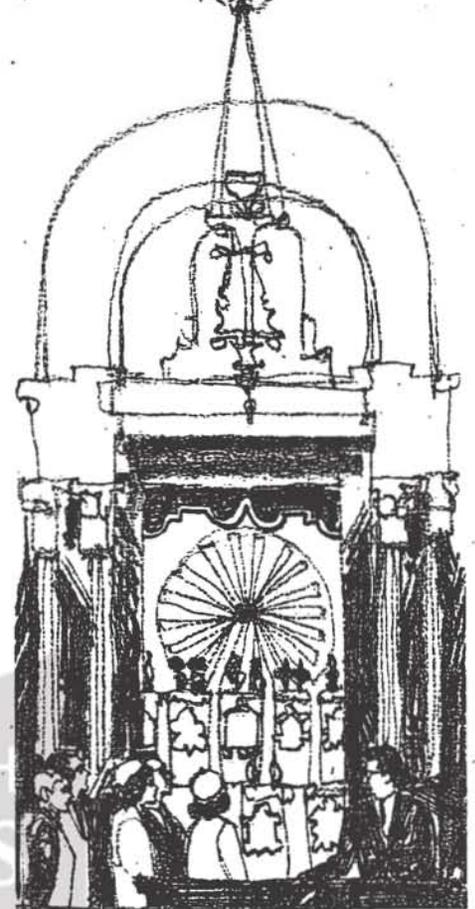
Father Kavanagh emphasizes that the Eucharistic celebration cannot be understood apart from its beginnings in the Jewish Passover meal, known as the *chaburah* (fraternal banquet). In the Eucharistic story (*haggadah* in Hebrew) telling of "God's mercies shown throughout history (terminating with His last and greatest mercy given us at the Last Supper), through its final development of thanksgiving and prayer for God's accomplishing His saving purposes as of now and in the future, the Christian Eucharistic prayer is a direct development out of Judaism," writes Father Kavanagh. In rediscovering its Jewish roots in prayer and its prophetic heritage, the Benedictine scholar adds, the Church is recovering her nature as the People of God, "as a community of service in and for the world."



In this sketch, you see me wearing a *tallis*, the "prayer shawl" worn by Orthodox and Conservative Jews at daily morning, Sabbath and holyday services. The *tallis* has four fringes at each corner in keeping with the biblical commandment: "Make a fringe upon the corners of your garments . . . that you may look upon it and remember the commandments of the Lord" (Numbers 16:37-39). Since rabbis are essentially laymen and not priests, they wear the same kind of prayer shawl as do all Jewish men who have celebrated their *bar mitzvah* (initiation into the adult Jewish community at age 13). Notice the skull cap or *yarmulkeh* on my head. It is also of ancient origin, based on the Near Eastern tradition of covering one's head as a mark of respect in the presence of God. Another reason for the *yarmulkeh* is that it is a symbolic remembrance of the Temple priesthood. The High Priest of the Temple wore a miter of fine linen cloth, coiled around his head like a turban. The *yarmulkeh* reminds Jews of their priestly role as members of a "kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).



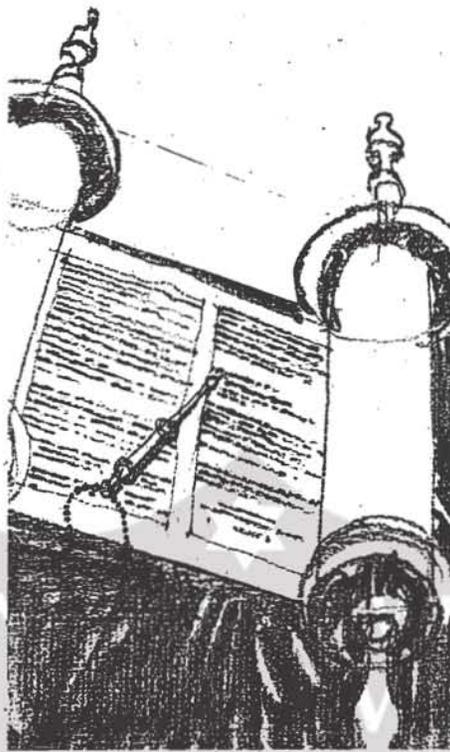
In most synagogues there is a candelabrum (*menorah*); it should consist only of five, six or eight branches, and not seven like that of the Temple of Jerusalem. In Central Synagogue, however, the *menorah*—beautiful, old and ornate—is based on the design of the ancient Temple *menorah* with its seven branches. You can read a description of the Temple's golden *menorah* in the plans for the Ark of the Covenant given in Exodus 25:31-40. You may have seen pictures of Titus' Arch of Triumph, commemorating the capture of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, that show Roman soldiers carrying away the *menorah* from the destroyed Temple.



Here from a distance you see the Torah scrolls held in the holy ark (in Hebrew, *A-ron ha-kodesh*). The ark and the Torah scrolls, the most sacred objects in the synagogue, are located usually on the east wall of the synagogue, pointing toward Jerusalem, site of the ancient Holy Temple. The original Ark of the Covenant, a gold-covered chest built at the direction of Moses (Exodus 25:10-22), housed the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The scrolls of the Law were placed beside the Ark (Deuteronomy 31:25). Today's holy ark is shaped like a closet and houses the Torah scrolls. To show the scrolls I have drawn open the *paroches*, the special velvet cover of the ark. Each synagogue has an eternal lamp, a *ner tamid*, which burns continually above the ark that enshrines the Torah as a sign that God's Word is the light of truth.



With great care and reverence, which all Jews show the Torah, I remove one of the scrolls from the ark. The scrolls are covered in velvet covers, called mantles, usually in the royal colors of dark red or blue. A breastplate hangs over the front of each Torah, recalling the breastplate adorned with precious stones worn by the Jewish High Priest during the ancient Temple services. The silver object atop the breastplate is the pointer, the yad, used during the Torah reading to point to the lines read during the Saturday morning Sabbath service. When the Torah is taken from the ark on Shabbos, Saturday morning, or during Jewish holidays, the entire congregation stands and chants in Hebrew: "And this is the Torah which Moses gave to the children of Israel, from out of the mouth of God and through the hands of Moses."



The Torah scroll is taken from the ark, placed on the reader's table in front of the ark and, after the mantle is removed, unrolled. The scriptures are written on sheets of parchment—fine sheepskin—by a specially trained scribe, a sofer. No mistakes are allowed in the writing of the scroll or the scroll is not valid for religious use. The Torah must be perfect and whole, as the Word of God is perfect and without blemish. During the Sabbath or holiday services, men called to read the Torah and the prophets stand before the open scroll and recite a blessing: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has given us the Law of truth, and planted eternal life among us. Blessed art thou, O Lord, giver of the Law." The reader—in Hebrew, the baal koreh—reads from the weekly portion, the sidrah, of the Five Books of Moses. The Torah reading is followed by a reading from the prophets, known as Haftarah. Note again the yad, the silver pointer.



When Christian churches at their services read one or two lessons from the scripture, they are basing their practice on that of the synagogue. In Catholic churches, the lectionary contains all the scriptural lessons read in the Mass on Sundays and holydays. In the early Church, these readings followed the scriptural cycle established in the synagogue. For Jewish worship, the Five Books of Moses are divided so that over the 52 weeks of the year, the congregation studies or hears the entire Torah—a form of education of the Jewish people that has become one of the major functions of the synagogue, and one of the major contributions of the Pharisees and the rabbis who have since followed them. The Church incorporated some of these instructional aspects of the synagogue service . . . Mother Katherine Marie is shown holding a rimonim, a decorative silver object shaped like a palm tree that sits on the roller of the Torah scroll. It symbolizes that the Torah is a tree of life to all who follow its commandments.