

## Rabbi's Reflections: The Synagogue--Part 1

Many Jews consider the synagogue Judaism's most important institution. Actually, the home is, which the synagogue reinforces. With the Temple's destruction, Christians shifted Temple sacrificial ritual to the church (the altar, communion table), while Jews moved it to the home (bread is the sacrifice on the table altar). Still, the synagogue has three functions, each with a name: *bet tefillah*, prayer house, *bet keneset*, assembly house (synagogue in Greek), *bet midrash*, study house (*shul* in Yiddish). The Talmud (*Megillah* 29a on Ezekiel 11:16) also calls it a *mikdash me'at*, a small sanctuary. These two columns will explore a bit of the meaning of the synagogue in modern Judaism and how we relate to its holiness.

A wit joked: Reform Jews attend services at Temple, Conservative Jews pray at synagogue, and Orthodox Jews *daven* at shul. Though not entirely accurate, it reveals some ideological assumptions expressed in architecture and practice. In the 1800's, Reform Jews often named their buildings "Temple," indicating they no longer yearned to return to Israel, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, and offer sacrifices. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (even in his Orthodox days) urged the synagogue to broaden into a Jewish center, shifting primary functions from prayer and learning to "social togetherness."

Certain Reform introduced changes alter the synagogue's layout. The *bimah* (platform) sits on the eastern wall with the ark, not in the center. The leaders' lecterns face the congregation, and professional clergy stand behind them. The *makhers'* (important peoples') seats no longer flank the ark. Modernist shuls no longer have a *mekhitzah* (partition separating men and women). Synagogues have an organ and a choir loft.

Altering the synagogue's layout makes statements about the synagogue and its nature. Removing seats (other than an officer or two) emphasizes the synagogue's democracy. Changing the lecterns, though, lessens respect due the ark, and forces the clergy to pray facing away from Jerusalem. Even worse, with the *bimah* in front (which increased the number of seats), clergy facing the congregation, the organ, and the choir loft, synagogue layout closely resembles a church, and congregants turn from *davenners* (pray-ers) into spectators watching a performance (Israel's national theater is named *Habimah*, The Platform). Moreover, the *kelei kodesh* (religious leaders, literally holy vessels) resemble Christian clergy (related to clerk, originally meaning priest), and now become professional Jews who often do our praying for us. A further downside to the clergy's expanded role is the lessening of congregants leading services, since neither rabbi nor *hazzan* (cantor) must lead the prayers; anyone can lead services if s/he learns the Hebrew and the proper musical motifs. Stressing beauty inside and out, especially the exterior, and introducing decorum and dignity inside, unfortunately, also lessens warmth and spontaneity. Oddly

enough, the modern synagogue, besides resembling a church, now closely parallels the Temple that Reform Jews tried to relegate to the past.

Some changes in the modern synagogue have been good, like lessening the impact of the influential, but others have been negative. Next month, the column will discuss the holiness of the synagogue and our role in it.

-- Rabbi Michael Rascoe