Illuminating Sacred Space:
Integrating Star Symbolism into Synagogue Art and Design

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East window, Eldridge Street Synagogue

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February 1, 2011

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination

Our praise to You, Eternal One, who brings the evening evermore:
wisely parting the gates of time, ushering in the seasons;
arraying with care the star-spangled sky;
unfurling light, then darkness, then light.
Gently You fold the day into night,
Adonai Tz'vaot is Your Name!
Living God, Your reign arches over us, Your light is everlasting.
Our praise to You, Eternal One, who brings the evening evermore.
Baruch atah, Adonai, hamaariv aravim.

–Ma'ariv Aravim prayer (from Mishkan Tefilah)

"A place of worship, simple as it may be, serviceable as it may be, is—or should be—different from a mere place of assembly. Something is happening there which is more than just existence, more than just a social event...modest as it may be, a place of worship seems to demands dignity and serenity as its birthright. It is part of its function to reach beyond function. Its destiny seems to express in static material—stone, concrete, glass—man's drive toward the spiritual. The inanimate structure reflects the vibrations of his thoughts, of his emotions, of his beliefs."

–Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), architect[1]

[1]Marcel Breuer, *Marcel Breuer Buildings and Projects 1921-1961* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962).

Acknowledgements

My thesis marks a milestone in my studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC). Thank you to HUC – the faculty, the administration and the entire staff – for the support you have given me during rabbinical school. And a special thank you to my classmates – I am so grateful to have shared in this journey with you all and look forward to friendships and collegiality in the years to come.

I feel deep gratitude for the professors at HUC and, most especially, for Dr. Larry Hoffman. You continually challenge me to strive in mind and spirit toward greater excellence. I know I am a better rabbi and person because of your mentorship. I am indebted to Dr. Sharon Koren, whose passion for teaching and text will always stay with me. Jewish Mysticism was a defining class, as you will see in the pages of this thesis.

Thank you to Bonnie and Daniel Tisch for your support of the Tisch Fellowship, which has continually been a source of inspiration over these past three years.

Dr. Richard Vosko, who opened up for me a whole new way to imagine sacred space. I will never forget drawing my future congregation on an August afternoon at the Clinton Inn. Thank you for your guidance and inspiration.

Dr. Lucille Roussin, who sat patiently with me in the Cardozo Law School lobby. Thank you for your helpful suggestions. Adam Yarinksy, of Architecture Research Office (ARO), I am so appreciative of the time you spent sharing about your work and passion for architecture.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the clergy who shared their visions for creating dynamic sacred space, in particular, Rabbi Laura Geller and Rabbi Don Goor.

Dr. Linda Thal and Rabbi David Adelson, for guiding me on my spiritual path. The staff of Just Congregations, most especially Rabbi Jonah Pesner and Lila Foldes. You both are bright stars in the Jewish community and I look forward to future work with you. To Rev. David Fleenor, for guiding me through new territory in the sacred work of pastoral care.

Thank you to the staff of the Eldridge Street Synagogue for welcoming me, offering me wonderful materials and general support. I am also grateful to the congregants of the Bialystoker for opening their doors to an inquiring student on a wintry morning.

To Devra, my aunt. *L'dor v'dor.* From before I can even remember, you have planted seeds of Jewish wisdom in my soul and I cannot begin to thank you. My husband, Rabbi Michael Cohen. My soul-mate, thank you for your continual support and love. My parents and my brother, who were the first ones to show me the starry heavens of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. I dedicate this thesis to my family, Michael, Eric, Jane and Andrew.

Thesis Summary

An exercise in re-interpreting ancient symbols and imagining refurbishing synagogues as the sacred is not just a theoretical one – this study is rooted in today's real challenges, where synagogues no longer have the daily relevance that they once did. To be effective, symbols must be lived with creative expression.

Through biblical literature, archeological evidence, rabbinic texts, and modern synagogue design, stars and the zodiac have represented changing theological ideas and have been a mark of Jewish identity. Why did this motif persist for so long? What role does cosmological symbolism play in our modern synagogues and how can we re-imagine, re-discover and re-interpret this symbolism in our sacred spaces today? The goal is to invigorate synagogues with the sacred sense that we get from spaces like mountains and stars, and the holy connectedness we have to memories and time.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One (Introduction) examines why the topic of sacred space is of concern to us today and how to define the sacred. I also introduce my focus on star symbolism as a significant motif within Jewish sacred places. In Chapter Two, I trace the possible meaning of the zodiac signs through ancient texts and synagogue architecture. Chapter Three moves from the ancient to the medieval and modern periods. I address the role of astrology, and the diminishment and then re-emergence of the zodiac motif within the larger context of European synagogue design. Chapter Three also examines the way star symbolism carried over into two American synagogues and how we might reinvent the motif in our sacred spaces. Finally, Chapter Four continues the exploration for what star symbolism means for us today.

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Introduction: A Starry Night in the Mountains

We journeyed every summer to the Sierra Nevada Mountains, through the Mojave Desert and sleepy Western towns on route 395, with names like Independence and Lone Pine. This was our pilgrimage. Evenings often held the excitement of driving to a lookout point, just outside the small town of Mammoth Lakes where the blanket of the night sky could be seen without any city light obstruction. The stars and planets were clear and bright, and during the summer months the shooting stars were spectacular. While my family was there alongside me, I often felt it was just me with the sky, just the sound of my breath, looking up with the cool hood of the car against my back, my soul with the breeze amidst the evergreens. I felt a part of the universe, a small fleck of stardust.

Now, when I recite the prayer *Ma'ariv aravim* in synagogue, I recall those summer nights surrounded by the stars. I feel part of the past multitudes of people awed by the night sky. I feel the immediate present (and Presence), and imagine future times in the cradle of God's art. I identify this as a defining mystical experience, one that I point to when illustrating the feeling of connection with the Divine (i.e., being in touch with my deepest essence while feeling part of something entirely beyond myself).

Granted, this experience does not necessarily stand on its own as mystical, for I am projecting an overlay of a mystical understanding from the Jewish texts I study as part of my spiritual and rabbinic journey. I long to find a language, framework, and perspective within Judaism to integrate my singular experience into a collective tradition.

This I know – there are certain moments in my life when I feel that I exist just to witness or be connected to the Divine. Such a time was the moment when I held the hand

of a 21-year old dying from cancer, singing *Elohai Neshama*, our eyes locked and my heart broken. I bring that experience into the tapestry of my spiritual life, and the prayer *Elohai Neshama* is forever changed. This I know – that the summer pilgrimage under the starry night sky, as I nestled into the bosom of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, is an experience I bring into the tapestry of my journey through sacred spaces and my sense of the cosmos. I can well imagine that if I were an architect of a sacred space, I would represent the awesomeness of the starry sky in its design.

My summer memories in the Sierra Nevada Mountains are captured in this idea: I traveled spiritually from the realm of the human toward the celestial, moving from the city lights of Los Angeles to the heavenly lights of the cosmos. Thus, through careful use and placement of light and other elemental materials, I would design a synagogue based on movement from the mundane to the holy. By way of introduction to my topic, join me as I describe this imagined sanctuary.

The winding roads that carried travelers on their summer ascent to the lookout point inspire the various paths leading to the threshold of the synagogue's main lobby. From a simple rock-garden path, to a more intricate floral landscape of local vegetation, to a small reflective pond – each leads the individual toward greater transcendence and stands for the many reasons that draw people to Judaism. Each approach integrates sculptures, telling the story of creation, but experienced differently depending on the time of day and the play of light over the interaction between the landscape and the art.

The single road that led to the scenic viewing point collected dozens of anticipating travelers on its way up to a steep Sierra precipice. In just that way, the main synagogue lobby gathers and ascends. Its windows and skylights hinting at the openness

of the night sky, providing warmth and welcome as congregants find ample space and configurations to gather and to focus. The sculptures surrounding the building are integrated with the artwork on the walls of the lobby, all of the pieces reflecting a sense of light, texture and movement up towards the heavens.

And then, we arrive to the summit point, the sanctuary. The ceiling of the sanctuary has larger and more dramatically shaped skylights than the lobby, designed with certain organic elements in mind – wind (*ruach*), water (*mayyim*), fire (*aish*). The skylights filter soft, natural light into the sanctuary space.[2] The sanctuary space is a sacred center in the life of the synagogue, a center for reflection and spiritual growth, both on an individual and communal level. From the pathways leading into the building, to the main lobby and the sanctuary itself, the theological idea of God as Creator is carefully and subtly infused within the design and choice of sustainable materials. The rhythm of holy time lifts congregants as they move from the mundane to the sacred, the human to the celestial.

In the above description, I chose to take a mystical moment under the night sky and imagined what a future synagogue of my design might look like. And yet, what is so necessary about translating sacred moments into a synagogue space? Why not continue

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[2] Samuel D. Gruber, "Sacred Space: Louis Kahn and the Architecture of Quiet Reverence," *Tablet Magazine*, September 2, 2009, accessed January 22, 2011, http://www.tabletmag.com/arts-and-culture/14889/sacred-space/.
I am inspired by the work of Jewish architect, Louis Kahn, who created plans for a synagogue sanctuary that was never built. Samuel Gruber writes, "Unlike contemporaries who brought bravado expressionism and superficial symbolism to synagogue design, Kahn searched for, and achieved, something deeper...he envisioned a concentrated sanctuary, simultaneously taut and calm, and lit by diffuse non-glare natural light filtered through "server" spaces of distinctive surrounding light towers. [Frank Lloyd Wright and Minoru Yamasaki] effectively used light for drama and symbolism. But instead of a strong light of revelation, Kahn preferred a diffuse light for reflection and contemplation."

to discover the majesty of the cosmos in the outdoors alone? Why have synagogues if you can experience a connection to God under the night sky?

These questions are not just theoretical – they are real, rooted in today's challenges, where synagogues no longer have the daily relevance that they once did. Before continuing with our investigation into refurbishing synagogues as the sacred, it is worth pausing to understand the critical moment through which synagogues are passing.

Just these past High Holidays, a friend who lives in Boulder, CO joined Adventure Rabbi Jamie Korngold, an outdoor enthusiast committed to discovering Judaism in the spirituality of the wilderness:

> Surrounded by the raw wonder of creation, Rabbi Korngold helps people experience an inner peace and an abiding connection to That Which is Greater Than Ourselves. In the wilderness, she believes, it is possible to distance ourselves from politics and protocol and allow the awareness of the connectedness of all things to permeate our souls.[3]

Lest you think the Adventure Rabbi program is all about the individual communing with nature, think again. According to Rabbi Jessica Zimmerman of Synagogue 3000,

> They celebrate Shabbat and holidays skiing, hiking, camping and learning Jewish texts and values off the beaten track. The Adventure Rabbi Program is a Jewish community without walls, in which the participants take seriously their responsibility to welcome new people, to learn about each other, to celebrate together, and to study Judaism. It is a community that brings together all kinds of Jews– the in-married, the out-married and the non-married; men, women, kids; real athletes and some urban folks who don't mind getting a little *shmutzy*. This is a real Jewish community…[4]

While I have not participated in this program, I love the idea of integrating my passion for the outdoors with Judaism. In selected ways within my emerging rabbinate, I have

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[3] "Adventure Rabbi," http://www.adventurerabbi.org/about.htm.

[4] Rabbi Jessica Zimmerman, August 11, 2009 (8:31 am), "City Rabbi Goes Country," *Synablog*, http://synagogue3000.org/synablog/2009/08/11/city-rabbi-goes-country/#comments.

drawn from Rabbi Korngold and others (like Rabbi Mike Comins, founder of Torah Trek), translating their ideas into more conventional Jewish communities.

The question, then, "Why have synagogues if you can experience a connection to God under the night sky?" is part of a larger trend within religious life that consistently challenges the relevance of churches and synagogues as conceived by previous generations. Another sign of that trend is the so-called emergent religious communities who have little use for the grand edifices of religion altogether. Why have an awesome sanctuary if you can gather in a local church basement and have a spirited prayer and social life there? And what goes for churches goes for synagogues. Do young Jews in search of the sacred need synagogues to find their way? The Adventure Rabbi Program may be seen as a kind of Jewish "emergent sacred community"[5]. One of the most notable differences between "emergents" and more conventional synagogues is that "the power of social ties in [the emergent communities] is palpable. They are critical for recruitment; essential to the ongoing life of the community; and effective in begetting a strong sense of attachment."[6] Broadly speaking, emergent communities are intimate, visionary, adaptable, and reach specific sectors, particularly young Jews and single Jews.

Increasingly, Jewish life in the 21st century is defined by the unconventional, while denominations, like Reform Judaism, are trying to catch up. Rabbi Peter Rubinstein speaks to this in the following remarks:

> In those halcyon days of the "Golden Age" of post-World War II Reform Jewry, Reform Judaism was robust, meaningful and focused on being a

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[5] Steven M.Cohen, J.Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, and Michelle Shain, "Emergent Jewish Communities and their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study," Synagogue 3000 and Mechon Hadar, November 2007, www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=2828.

[6] Ibid.,35.

> distinctly modern bridge between Jewish loyalties and beckoning American society. But with a quickening evolution in Jewish life impacted by social changes, particularly in the last two decades, our once visionary Reform movement has been left behind. Our organizations and even our synagogues have stayed in a distinctly 20th century mode while 21st century Jewry has dramatically altered. The ramifications are quite profound.[7]

The task before conventional Jewish communities, from the small synagogues to the large ones residing in stately buildings that have stood for hundreds of years, is to look broadly at the changes that have already impacted Jewish life as we know it. How can we learn from the emergent communities and integrate new ways of engaging spiritual seekers and Jews of all stripes? I don't believe it is an either/or strategy, i.e, to gather in synagogues sanctuaries *or* to join rabbis who scale mountaintops or meet in basements. What we need is a meeting place of the spirit, which can occur in synagogues as well as anywhere else. The basement scenario is dependent on what individuals bring to the occasion; those who gather in basements are not seeking our help. But what about the people who yearn for the sacred on mountains and under stars? They require an external connection to the sacred. Can synagogues provide that for them, without sending them out into the world of nature? Conventional congregations need to recognize the profundity of sharing moments together under the night sky. We should create opportunities to engage outside the walls of the congregation and then integrate that experience into the time spent together back in synagogue sanctuaries.

However, the reverse is true as well. Experiments like the Adventure Rabbi program are potentially limiting. The wilderness can enhance spiritual awareness, but it can also be merely a retreat: "In the wilderness," says Rabbi Korngold, "it is possible to

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[7] "21st Century Jewry: A Renaissance of Reform Judaism, "Sermon by Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, September 9, 2010, http://www.centralsynagogue.org/index.php/worship/sermons/1597/.

distance ourselves from politics and protocol and allow the awareness of the connectedness of all things to permeate our souls."[8] But being part of the public sphere need not be demeaning or diminishing. It can be seen itself as connected to all things. Politics in synagogues, as elsewhere, can indeed be a source of dysfunction and spiritual drain. But when harnessed effectively by superb clergy and lay leadership, the very same politics can be an incredible source of power and transformation. Why not, then, bring the sacred of the outdoors into the synagogue? Why not bring the stars down to earth for a while? Why not strive after an environment of the sacred in the synagogue – from which synagogue goers can emerge to engage in the world rather than retreat into their own private lives alone?

Furthermore, there is something sacred about building a spiritual home, a place of memories, which generations can return to again and again. Material culture can shape who we are, as we give form and meaning to space. On religious architecture, Dr. Richard Vosko writes,

> While both religious and secular buildings can help humans with the intricacies of everyday life, religious places differ in that they provide references to a more extraordinary realm of possibility that often defies rational explanation. While secular places tend to be focused on immediate tasks and rewards, religion can create a broader perspective for living not defined by the commercial appeal of everyday life. Religions provide guidelines, inspiration and hope—recipes for dealing with the travails of human existence. They also help humans mark life-cycle events from the cradle to the grave, providing moments of celebrating and comfort.[9]

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[8] "Adventure Rabbi," http://www.adventurerabbi.org/about.htm.

[9] Richard Vosko, "The Search for Symbolism in Religious Architecture," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects, Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture* (Fall 2009) http://www.aia.org/practicing/groups/kc/AIAB081076.

There is something unique and sacred about entering into a religious place that gathers together the memories of many generations. For example, this Fall I went to Congregation Kol Ami in White Plains where my grandmother was the first woman board member, where my parents were married, and where I now visit to discover my roots. I love that my great-grandparents were married in 1912 at Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn; when I enter its sanctuary, my sense of connection to the past is as profound as standing on a mountaintop, looking over the expanse of valleys and miles of wilderness.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell writes, "Your sacred space is where you can find yourself again and again."[10] I believe Campbell speaks to an integral part of a synagogue's potential sanctity – the ideal, really, for what a synagogue or any religious place should be. However, couldn't we say the same for sacred time? *Within sacred time you can find yourself again and again.* Within worship and rituals we can discover our inner core, and a sense of awe that brings us beyond the ordinary. So, understanding what constitutes sacred space is inherently part of a larger quest to define the sacred, both in place and time. What then is the sacred, whether under the stars or in memories, in space or in time?

Perhaps the most common definition comes from theologian Rudolf Otto who finds the sacred in the non-rational,

> The consciousness of a 'wholly other' evades precise formulation in words, and we have to employ symbolic phrases which seem sometimes sheer paradox, that is, irrational, not merely non-rational, in import. So with religious awe and reverence. In ordinary fear and in moral reverence I can indicate in conceptual terms which it is that I fear or revere; injury,

[10] Diane K. Osbon, ed. *Reflections on the Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion* (New York: HarperPerennial 1991) 180.

> e.g., or ruin in the other case, heroism or strength of character in the other. But the object of religious awe or reverence—the *tremendum* and *augustum*, cannot be fully determined conceptually: it is non-rational, as is the beauty of a musical composition, which no less eludes complete conceptual analysis.[11]

Otto defines holiness as that which is mysterious, both awe-inspiring and fascinating, and wholly non-reducible to a rational category. Like the art of a musical composition, sanctity leaves an impression that transcends a single note or symbol.

Yet Otto was shaped by the world in which he lived. He was born in 1869, into a Europe punctuated by grand sanctuaries and articulations of God that positioned God as distant. We may learn from Otto but ought not be limited to him. Styles and conventions, the language to describe God and the larger cultures of which we are a part, change and evolve with time. Otto's words still resonate with us today, but our own culture and context have given us other ways as well to define the sacred.

Today, the sacred is primarily discovered through the language and practice of spirituality. Rabbi Sharon Brous, founding rabbi of IKAR, writes:

> Spiritual practice pries open our hearts so that we can discern the voice of God and the presence of holiness in the world. Sometimes there is so much noise - in our homes, on our streets, on the news - that mindful awareness is out of reach. So we have to alter our rhythm in order to make space for the life of the spirit. Shabbat -- one of the oldest and most profound spiritual practices - holds transformative power precisely it lifts us out of the routine of the week to create holy space in time. By creating a temporary alternative reality, Shabbat presents a compelling counter-testimony to the world as it is, reminding us to dream of the world as it ought to be.[12]

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[11] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950) 59.
[12] Rabbi Sharon Brous, "Bring Heaven Down to Earth," *On Faith* (blog), The Washington Post, August 10, 2010, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/sharon_brous/2010/08/bring_heaven_down_to_earth.html.

The sacred is centered on the belief that we can discover something so extraordinary (Brous points to the ritual of Shabbat) that we feel nourished in mind, body, and spirit. Within the spiritual practice of time-honored rituals, we can find healing in our brokenness, connectedness to tradition and community, and a sense of purpose in our lives.

There is yet another point worth exploring here: our sacred text that has traveled with us and shaped us through our journey: the Torah. In the opening chapter of Genesis, God blesses the many elements of creation, thereby investing them with the sacred. Space has now become holy. As the final act of creation, however, God sanctifies not just space but time, marking Shabbat as a day set aside from the others. As religious, spiritual, ritualized beings, we bring sanctity into time and space – our own creative act of *imitatio dei*: "At our best, we men and women are moved to act as God does, and when we do, we create sacred sites of our own. Our maps of the sacred are thus a human recognition of the traces of God's presence on the one hand and a road map of the human spirit at its finest on the other."[13]

Back, then, to my imagined synagogue sanctuary with which I began, this time applying the definitions and understandings just explored. The goal is to invigorate synagogues with the sacred sense that we get from spaces like mountains and stars; but also the holy connectedness we have to memories and time. In the most elemental sense, sacred space is where holy moments are created, but also where they are remembered: they include recollections of sacred spaces we have encountered and sacred times we have known.

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[13] Lawrence Hoffman, "Sacred Places and the Pilgrimage of Life." *Meeting House Essays series* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991) 15.

In other words, we enter synagogue with personal and collective experiences of transcendence and transformation. By transcendence I mean, a conscious effort to seek out the Divine. Transformation, on the other hand, occurs unconsciously, without a sense of Divine presence. The place surrounding us becomes an elemental way to remember such experiences and reconnect to that which is most meaningful in our lives. As we change over time and as new experiences inform our sense of the world and of ourselves, our synagogues should be places that illuminate sanctity. Synagogues can, therefore, be places that remind us of what we know, and of what we have yet to discover – the importance of community, of stories and of rituals.

I have been using the words "space" and "place" interchangeably, but in fact they are different. Space is unformed place. We give character to space, in this case, we designate a particular domain as sacred. In other words, "it is place, not space, that gives us virtual domain, which we fill with activity appropriate to that domain's character: ball games in ball parks, leisurely walks through gardens, meditations in ashrams, religious sites in sacred forests."[14] Space exists in our world with the *potential* to become a sacred place. A sacred place, then, as Jonathan Smith describes it, is a

> Place of clarification (a focusing lens) where men and gods are held to be transparent to one another. It is a place where, as in all forms of communication, static and noise (i.e, the accidental) are decreased so that the exchange of information can be increased...It becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way.[15]

This definition speaks to the active manner in which we are moved to demarcate the sacred within our world.

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[14] Lawrence Hoffman, "Sacred Places and the Pilgrimage of Life." *Meeting House Essays series* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991) 15.
[15] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual." *History of Religions*, vol. 20, no 1/2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 115-116.

Because sacred moments under the starry heavens figure universally into the human experience, they have inspired countless sacred places. Archeological evidence indicates that our earliest human ancestors gathered in places to mark the movement of the sun, moon and stars, and the seasonal changes that determine agricultural cycles. Originally, sacred gathering places were outside, but as cultures evolved, they became enclosed, featuring adornment and varied architectural styles. While there have been great changes technologically, socially, and culturally over time, Mircea Eliade claims humans continually translate ancient ideas into their present:

> The most ancient sanctuaries were hypaethral or built with an aperture in the roof—the 'eye of the dome' symbolizing break-through from plane to plane, communication with the transcendent. Thus *religious architecture simply took over and developed the cosmological symbolism already present in the structure of primitive habitations*...This is as much to say that all symbols and rituals having to do with temples, cities and houses *are finally derived from the primary experience of sacred space.*[16]

Eliade's perspective is essential to explore in a study of cosmological symbolism, however it is limited. Lawrence Hoffman notes, "True enough, some cultures say the center of the earth runs through their holy site; but most do not. This claim is an accident, hardly the essence of sacred places. Understanding sacred places requires beginning all over again."[17] Defining sacred space across all cultures and religions is a generalization we impose and does not begin to grasp the manner in which "insiders

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[16] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane-The Nature of Religion* (NY: Harcourt Inc, 1959) 58.

[17] For further reflection, see *To Take Place* by Jonathan Smith. Lawrence Hoffman, "Sacred Places and the Pilgrimage of Life." *Meeting House Essays series* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991) 6-7.

...learn to recognize basic myths of origin or of creation, its corollary social arrangements and status systems and the dreams of tomorrow toward which it aspires."[18]

From the desert Tabernacle, through the Jerusalem Temple, to our synagogues today Jews have aspired to commune with the Divine in sacred places. As Jon Levenson claims, "The Temple is the world as it ought to be. It is a world in which God's reign is unthreatened, and [God's] justice is manifest...the Temple was a piece of primal perfection available within the broken world of ordinary experience—heaven on earth."[19] Levinson's estimation of the Temple is no less true for us today. We still bring perfection down into our world through building Jewish sanctuaries, with a sense of radical possibility that wholeness can indeed manifest in our broken world. Our sacred spaces too can invite us in, to journey, to discover, to aspire, and, ultimately, to feel a part of the grandeur of our world and cosmos.

It is my intention to explore one example of the way cosmological symbolism has shaped synagogue design. For centuries, stars in general (*kochavim*), and the zodiac (*mazelot*)[20] in particular, have served as a symbolic motif in the decoration of synagogue space. Through biblical literature, archeological evidence, rabbinic texts, and modern synagogue design, stars and the zodiac have represented changing theological ideas and have been a mark of Jewish identity. Why did this motif persist for so long? What role does cosmological symbolism play in our modern synagogues and how can we re-imagine, re-discover and re-interpret this symbolism in our sacred spaces today?

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[18] Ibid.,16.
[19] Jon D. Levenson, "The Jerusalem Temple in Devotional and Visionary Experience." *Jewish Spirituality From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 53.
[20] The word *kochav* is used numerous times in the Bible, whereas *mazelot* is more common in rabbinic literature.

Ancient Motifs and Symbols

Star Symbolism in the Bible

An advertisement on the first page of a recent *New Yorker* featured a quote by the Renaissance genius Leonardo Da Vinci: "*Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.*"[21] Although Da Vinci was not referring to the Bible, he could just as well have been evoking the language and imagery of Genesis. The opening chapter of the Bible is certainly simple, but the simplicity is not the end story. As Jon Levenson points out regarding Chapter 1 "this eerie abstractness, combined with the highly schematic and formulaic structure of the narrative, conveys a sense of the awe-inspiring majesty and inviolable sovereignty of the God on whom the narrative is unswervingly focused."[22] The cosmos is God's Temple. God functions as a kind of priest in the sanctuary of the cosmos, and as such, blesses the luminaries, blooming trees, all creatures, order and boundaries.

The story of Genesis is a narrative explanation of the world as told through the eyes of the biblical author. But Genesis is more as well – it is an effort to differentiate Israel from her neighbors, a testament of faith, a search for meaning. Differentiation and faith come together in the grand cosmology of Genesis. Our first introduction to stars exemplifies a religious worldview distinguished from that of the Babylonians. In 1:16 we read, "*God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars.*"[23] The cosmic lights of the sun and moon are

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[21] *The New Yorker*, Hyatt Hotels advertisement, November 1, 2010.
[22] Jon D. Levenson, *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 12.
[23] Genesis 1:16

further defined in this verse, and yet, we are still left with the question, "What is the role of the stars?" The stars remain unspecified, but why?

Biblical critics believe the unspecified role of stars reveals the priestly attitude towards astrology. According to the JPS Commentary on Genesis, "This silence constitutes a tacit repudiation of astrology."[24] This, the first Chapter of Genesis, was composed by exiled priests residing in Babylonia, or those recently returned to Israel;[25] their depiction of stars distinguished themselves and the Israelite tradition from the Babylonians. For the Babylonians, the ancient people to whom the birth of astrology is credited, gods resided in the stars,[26] which were themselves also divine. Understanding stars and their movement could predict future events. By contrast, the stars of Genesis are lights created in the heavens by God. They are not divine entities in and of themselves, nor do they predict the future, as we will see more directly in an Abraham

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[24] Nahum M. Sarna, ed. *The JPS Torah Commentary-Genesis* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 10.

[25] David W. Cotter, ed., *Genesis-Brit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003) 7.
"Source critics tells us that Genesis 1 is part of the Priestly Document, composed by a member of the exiled people of Israel, or one of the recently returned exiles, in order, at least in part, to serve as a polemic against the cult of Babylon. All of that is inferred, however, and the story is told without any of it being made explicit to the reader..."

[26] Nahum M. Sarna, ed. *The JPS Torah Commentary-Genesis* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 7. Genesis 1 differs from Enuma Elish, most notably the role of the stars in the universe (in Enuma Elish, stars are gods, seated on platforms and in Genesis they are merely lights, signs to tell the passage of time). Also see Jeremiah 10:2 which reads, "Thus said the Lord:/Do not learn to go the way of the nations,/And do not be dismayed by portents in the sky;/Let the nations be dismayed by them!" and II Kings 23:5, where King Josiah orders a sweeping reformation of cultic practices, including against "those who make offerings to Baal, to the sun and moon and constellations-all the host of heaven."

narrative. The God of Genesis is not a force *in* nature, but controls the natural realm as a conductor directs the symphony.

The progression from Day 3 to Day 4 in Chapter 1 serves as another indication of the priestly effort to differentiate Israelite religion from the surrounding Babylonian one. The growth of vegetation on Day 3 appears before the sun, moon and stars on Day 4:

> The emergence of vegetation prior to the existence of the sun, the studied anonymity of these luminaries, and the unusually detailed description have the common purpose of emphasizing that sun, moon, and stars are not divinities, as they were universally thought to be; rather, they are simply the creations of God, who assigned them the function of regulating the life rhythms of the universe...[27]

These two examples from Chapter 1 of Genesis display an underlying textual unity as far as astrology is concerned. When Genesis was written, astrology was in an early stage of development within the Israelite community (though this will change in the Hellenistic period, as we will see in the next section of this chapter). Any devotion to stars or use of Babylonian astrology to understand the universe contradicted Priestly theology.

For the priests stars possess no inherent sanctity; they cannot predict the future – God alone knows future events. But this is not to say that stars are as always negative in the Bible. When Baalam blesses the people he says, "A star rises from Jacob, a scepter comes forth from Israel."[28] The parallelism in these two verses connects "star" with "scepter" so in this instance we can understand stars as functioning like a scepter, a kind of identity marker. Compared to other nations, the power and sovereignty of the

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[27] Nahum M. Sarna, ed. *The JPS Torah Commentary-Genesis* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 9.

[28] Numbers 24:17. According to Meir Bar-Ilan, Balaam's practices might be considered as a kind of "pre-Astrology." For more information, see the following: Meir Bar-Ilan, "Astrology in Ancient Judaism" and "Astronomy in Ancient Judaism." J. Neusner, A. Avery-Peck and W. S. Green, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism, V, Supplement Two* (Boston: Brill, 2004) 2031-2044.

Israelites is like rising star; thus the symbol of the star can be used metaphorically for positive aims.

Another example, which speaks to the positive use of stars as metaphor, centers around our patriarch Abraham as he journeys under the desert night sky. Imagine leaving everything you ever knew based on a promise, an idea, a dream. Departing from the known to the great realm of open desert. Famine. Foreign rulers. And through each stage of the journey, a promise: *I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring can be counted*" (Genesis 13:16). Abraham journeyed forward, without a word of doubt, imagining his future children and the nation they would eventually become.

And then, for the first time, Abraham complains to God. After all the wandering and danger along the way, Abraham speaks back and says, "*Adonai, Adonai ma titen li*?" (*Lord God, what can You give me?)*[29]. Childless and aging, Abraham turns to God and reveals his doubt, an expression of uncertainty we have not seen previously in the narrative.

How does God respond? *God took [Abram] outside and said, 'Look toward the sky and count the stars if you are able to count them.' And God said to him, 'So will your offspring be.'*[30] Again, the biblical author portrays stars as a positive metaphor, this time for Abraham's future offspring. But this is not astrology: Abraham does not use the stars to predict his future; God simply points to them as an analogy. It is as if God is saying, "I swear upon my own creation, the cosmos, that I will uphold my covenant with you."

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[29] Genesis 15:2

[30] Genesis 15:5. For other examples that compare the stars with the people of Israel, see the following: Deut. 1:10; 10:22; 28:62.

A careful reading of Genesis 15 illuminated the function of the starry sky as a symbol, not just for Abraham but for all human beings. According to Westermann's commentary on Genesis,

> It is certainly no accident that the invitation to look up at the stars occurs only once more in the Old Testament, and again in Deutero-Isaiah (40:26). In this case, of course, it refers to the might of the Creator, while in Genesis 15:5 the comparison is between the vast number of the stars and the vast number of Abraham's descendants; nevertheless, in both cases looking at the stars is looking into the broad expanse of activity of the creator which transports man's gaze from the narrow horizon of human events...[31]

The grandeur of the night sky in Genesis 15 comes to symbolize a deeper awaking of human consciousness of the *Borei*, the Creator.

These are just a few examples of the way stars are used as a symbolic motif in the biblical narrative. In the story of creation, stars represent the formation of Israelite identity in the context of her neighbors. In the story of Abraham, stars are featured in a moment of covenantal promise with the Jewish People. In Deutero-Isaiah, stars appear as a similar guarantee of God's sovereignty for all peoples. What we don't see is Abraham (or anyone else) using the stars for astrological purpose; rather they are symbolic of the human potential to reach towards the Divine and have faith in the midst of uncertainty and change.

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[31] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*. Trans., John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) 221.

Star Symbolism in Rabbinic and Hekhalot Texts[32]

The rabbinic regard for astrology is far more varied than the consistent message of the biblical writers. By the Talmudic period, astrology had become part of the standard repertoire of Babylonian science, causing the Rabbis to accept it, albeit balanced against the strict universal monotheism that they inherited from the Bible. In Palestine too, astrology was taken as the norm, to the extent that Rabbis there too accept certain aspects of it. It therefore figures prominently in the many different genres of rabbinic literature – midrashic, talmudic, homiletical, liturgical and hekhalot. The discussion here will serve as a context to the next section, ("Star Symbolism in Ancient Synagogues"), an examination of the archeological and artistic representation of cosmological symbolism during roughly the same time as the texts explored here.

Let us return to the story of Abraham under the starry sky through two midrashim in *Bereshit Rabbah.* In one of the interpretations of 15:5 ("God took him outside"), the Rabbis derive the lesson that God is above the stars and ultimately in control:

> R.Joshua said in R.Levi's name: Did He then lead him out, beyond the world (*vayoitzay oto ha-chutzah*)? It means that He showed him the streets of heaven, as you read, *He had not yet made the earth, or the outer spaces—chuztoth* (Proverbs 8:26). R.Judah ben R.Simon said in R.Johanan's name: He lifted him up above the vault of heaven; thus He

[32] To begin, it is essential to provide a working definition for both astrology and astronomy, two words I use throughout this paper. Astronomy is a science, the study of objects and matter outside the Earth's atmosphere and their physical and chemical properties. It is an academic discipline. Astrology, on the other hand, is the divination of the supposed influences of the stars and planets on human affairs and terrestrial events by their positions and aspects, and thus by modern standards, is not a science. As of the Enlightenment, astrology and astronomy became distinct but one could use them interchangeably when describing the reality of the rabbinical period since divination and science were one and the same. Instead of writing two words in every occurrence or interchanging them, I will use the word "astrology" in this section to encompass both. Definitions from *Merriam-Webster OnLine*, s.v. "astrology," and "astronomy" http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary.

> says to him, Look *(habbet)* now toward heaven, *habbet* signifying to look down from above (i.e take a wider perspective). The Rabbis said: [God said to him]: 'You are a prophet, not an astrologer'...[33]

In this midrash God took Abraham out of the terrestrial void and lifted him above the stars, and in a second midrash, commenting on Genesis 15:3 ("Since you have granted me no offspring...") we read:

> *Since you have granted me no offspring*...R.Shmuel bar Rav Yitzak [reads Abraham as saying]: My astrological calculations confine me (*dochakayni*), saying to me, 'Abram, you will have no offspring.' God said to him: Yes, according to your words, it is Abram who will not have a son, but Abraham will have a son. Sarai, your wife shall not be called her name Sarai—Sarai shall not give birth, Sarah will give birth.[34]

The two midrashim are aligned in their assertion that it is not the astrological signs, but the Creator of those stars who ultimately determine Abraham's future. *Mazal*, the astrological calculations, do initially force Abraham to consider that he will be childless forever. Astrology does work! But Abraham is not constrained by what the stars say. Abraham can be governed by the wider perspective, which only God is capable of seeing in that moment. God created the stars; God can overcome them, for He will rename Abram as Abraham and Sarai as Sarah. Astrology's message is true but limited.

The *Bereshit Rabbah* texts reflect a consensus vis-à-vis the subordinate role of astrology, but not all Rabbis interpret astrology in this way. The talmudic *sugya* of Shabbat 156a/b, for example, is more accepting regarding stars and constellations[35]:

> It was recorded in Rabbi Joshua ben Levi's notebook: A man born on the first day of the week shall be someone without one [thing] in him? What does without one [thing] in him mean? Shall we say, without one virtue?...He who is born on the fourth day of the week will be wise and

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[33] *Bereshit Rabbah, Lech Lecha*, 44:12.
[34] ibid., 44:10.
[35] Rabbi Joshua ben Levi was a first generation Amora in Eretz Israel (first half of the 3rd century). Rabbi Hanina (3rd-4th centuries C.E) was Rabbi Yohanan's student.

> have a retentive memory. What is the reason? Because the luminaries (sun, moon and stars) were suspended [on the fourth day of creation]...
>
> Rav Hanina said to [his disciples]: Go out and tell the son of Levi, the constellation of the hour, not the constellation of the day, is the determining influence. He who is born under the constellation of the sun will be a distinguished [bright, handsome] man: he will eat and drink of his own and his secrets will lie uncovered; if a thief, he will have no success...He who is born under Mercury will have a retentive memory and be wise. What is the reason? Because Mercury is the sun's scribe...
>
> It was stated, R.Hanina said: The planetary influence (*mazal*) gives wisdom, *mazal* gives wealth, and Israel stands under *mazal*. R.Yohanan maintained: Israel is immune from *mazal*. Now, R.Yohanan is consistent with his view, for R.Yohanan said: How do we know that Israel is immune from *mazal*? Because it is said, *Thus said the Lord, Learn not the ways of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the nations are dismayed at them* (Jeremiah 10:2). They are dismayed, but not Israel.[36]

Rabbi Yohanan supports the perspective of *Bereshit Rabbah* – however powerful the planetary influence, Israel transcends them. Rabbi Hanina disagrees, suggesting everyone is bound by the influence of the stars and planets. Embedded in the debate are two allied concerns. The first is scientific, a question of whether astrology works, and if so, to what extent. What is the role of fate or destiny in our lives? Are the events that befall us predetermined, so that by understanding the rhythms of creation, can we anticipate our fate? Can we change it? The second is theological, the consequences, as it were, of the first. Is the use of astrology a form of idolatry? How do we remain unique as compared to the other nations if we embrace this form of divination?

The debate in Shabbat 156a/b reflects the fact that the ancient world was convinced of astrology's worth. However different their cultures, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans agreed at least on that. Astrologers forecasted events for every level of society, commoner to emperor. Tiberius, as one example, determined his actions

[36] BT *Shabbat* 156a/b.

according to such popular divination.[37] Greek philosophers debated extensively on the merits versus the dangers of astrology. The Rabbis could do no less. Astrology's attraction only increased over time as the Jewish calendar became a major focus of debate and controversy.[38] While there were those who continued to reject it, "no doubt the adherents of this esteemed science and divination were far more numerous...Astrology played its role not only in day-to-day behavior, but reached the mainstream of the Jewish religion, synagogues, liturgy, sermons, piyyut and Targum."[39]

In addition to midrashic and talmudic texts, we find sermons from the Amoraic period addressing the role of astrology in Jewish tradition. For example, in a sermon from *Pesikta Rabbati*, a major work written in Palestine from the 5th-6th century, the writer references the zodiac signs and portrays God as an astrologer who selects an auspicious month in which to give the Torah:

> And why was the Torah given during Sivan and not in Nisan nor during any one of the other months? What parable applies as an answer to this question? That of a king who was arranging the festivities of his daughter's wedding. And a man - one of the royal dignitaries - said: 'It would be seemly for the princess, after she is seated in the palaquin, to have her ride on an elephant and so raise her among all the nobles of the kingdom'...Then a man spoke up and said: 'An elephant stands high, and a horse is comely; but neither has a mouth to speak with, hands to clap together, nor feet to dance with. Hence it is fitting for me to extol the princess, for I have a mouth to speak with, hands to clap together, and feet

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[37] Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London: Routledge, 1994) 63.
[38] Descendants of the Zadokite priests, who had used a solar calendar when the Temple stood, advocated for a continuation of the solar calendar, whereas the rabbis preferred a lunar one. The debate over the role of astrology in determining the proper rhythms of Jewish ritual life as expressed in a Jewish calendar ultimately culminated when R.Saadya Gaon, who was well versed in astrology, crystallized one calendar for the Jewish community. See Rachel Elior, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism.* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004) 31.
[39] Meir Bar-Ilan, "Astrology in Ancient Judaism" and "Astronomy in Ancient Judaism." J. Neusner, A. Avery-Peck and W. S. Green, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism, V, Supplement Two* (Boston: Brill, 2004) 2044.

> to dance with; and so I would have her mount on my shoulders to display her loveliness.' So too, the Holy One, blessed be He, did not give the Torah in Nisan nor in Iyar, because the sign of Nisan in the zodiac is a lamb, and the sign of Iyar is an ox, and it is not fitting for them to extol and praise the Torah. Hence the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah in Sivan, because the sign of Sivan is twins, and the twins are human, and being human, have mouths to speak with, and hands to clap together, and feet to dance with.[40]

What we can derive is that the writer of the above sermon understands God as so concerned with the zodiac, that God matches one particular zodiac sign and its effect in this world with the most sacred moment in our covenantal relationship with the Divine, the moment at Mount Sinai. Clearly, the Rabbi who wrote this sermon employed astrology to explain the signature moment of Jewish tradition, the giving and receiving of Torah. But what shall we make of this application? If this form of divination is sanctioned by God, then why should it not be applicable to human beings? Alternatively, the text might further the argument from *Bereshit Rabbah*, that God alone determines astrological calculations, for the use of astrology among humans is noticeably absent from this sermon. Only God can consult astrology effectively. Either way, however, the signs of the zodiac play a powerful and significant role in the unfolding of Jewish time.

We also find several piyyutim from the Amoraic era that reference the zodiac signs, including one still recited by traditional Jews on the 9th of Av:

> Because of our sins, the Temple was destroyed.
> Because of our crimes, the Sanctuary was burned.
> In the city that was once bound firmly together,
> Lamentations were heard,
> And the host of heaven sounded a dirge…
> Aries, first of all the constellations
> Wept bitterly, for his sheep
> Were led to slaughter.

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[40] *Pesiqta Rabbati*, Piska 20 (consulted English translation: Leon Nemoy, ed., *Pesiqta Rabbati* vol. XVIII (New Haven: Yale Judaica Series, 1968) 399.

> Taurus howled on high for the horns of the firstling bull
> Were brought low...[41]

Written by Eleazar Kallir in the 4th/5th centuries, this liturgical poem paints an intriguing image of the zodiac signs in lamentation over the fallen Temple. Aries and Taurus serve as literary figures, suggestive of the whole "host of heaven" who "sounded a dirge." Kallir conveys an emotional intensity and pain through the grandeur and dramatic scale by which the reverberations of mourning extend.

In the sermon in *Pesikta Rabbati*, God uses astrology to choose the auspicious month to give the Torah. Here we find the zodiac associated with another dramatic moment in the unfolding of Jewish time, not revelation, but the destruction of the Temple. This one is clearly mournful, the opposite of Sinai since the Rabbis believed the Temple fell because Jews didn't keep Torah. Each zodiac sign in the heavenly realm reacts to the destruction of the Temple in its own appropriate way. Aries (the Sheep), for example, weeps over the flock of God's people led to their death as the city of Jerusalem burns. The reader is invited to feel a proximity to the zodiac signs, even though they reside in the heavens. The signs of the zodiac are acutely aware of the pain in the earthly realm, and by extension, we journey upwards toward the heavenly in a shared lament.

Unlike the Rabbis who were concerned with halacha and theology, Kallir was a poet. He is not making a statement about the use of the zodiac signs to determine the future, the extent of their power in the cosmos, or how the signs might influence Israel as compared to other nations. Instead, Kallir used the zodiac signs as a metaphor to illustrate the whole expanse of the heavenly hosts weeping over the fallen Temple. This

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[41]Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World-Toward a New Jewish Archeology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 202.

piyyut shows us that star imagery figured into an array of literature at this time, not only composed by the Rabbis, but by poets and other sectors of the Jewish community as well.

Early piyyutim influenced another key body of literature in which we find several references to the zodiac and cosmology – the hekhalot literature. Hekhalot literature re-interpreted ancient traditions centered in the Temple following its destruction. *Hekhal* refers to the hall in front of the Holy of Holies and the literature is named as such because it recounts a mystic's journey through the heavenly palaces of the Temple, arriving at the divine chariot or throne (*merkavah*).[42] Within the literature we find different types of mysticism: heavenly ascent; adjuration (calling down of a heavenly angel to teach secret wisdom); and a description of God's chariot and body, known as *Shiur Komah* (Measurement of the Height).

Who were the writers of hekhalot literature and when did they write? Several scholars examine different themes within hekhalot literature to form their ideas. Rachel Elior believes the roots extend from the culture of the Qumran sect of the second half the second century B.C to 68 A.D.[43] Elior argues that early apocalyptic works of the Qumran community served as an inspiration for later hekhalot texts, creating an "uninterrupted line...from the religious-literary activity of the last centuries B.C...to the mystical works of the first centuries A.D known as hekhalot and merkavah literature."[44] For example, Elior focuses on the preference for a solar calendar in Qumran literature as a shared characteristic within hekhalot texts. The sun god in Greek mythology (Helios) is featured

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[42] Ezekiel 1:15-21
[43] Michael Knibb, *The Qumran Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 4.
[44] Rachel Elior, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism.* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004) ix.

in the work called *Sefer Harazim (*The Book of Secrets*)*. Dated from third or fourth century Palestine, the following prayer can be found in this book:

> I adore you, Helios, who rises in the east, the good sailor, faithful guardian, trustworthy leader, who from of old set the great sphere on its course, the holy orderer of the stars, he who rules the heavenly byways. Lord! Illustrious leader! King! Orderer of the stars.[45]

The depiction of Helios as "the sailor who is good," ruling over the cosmos can be traced to the emphasis on the sun as a source of good in Qumran literature, as we see in the following example: "Who has created the morning as a sign to reveal the dominion of the light as the boundary of the daytime...For the light is good."[46]

Gershom Sholem also believed hekhalot literature was created in an early period, though not because of its relationship to the literature of Qumran. He asserted that all hekhalot texts contain

> Varying descriptions of the end of the world, and calculations of the date set for the redemption...It is safe to say that what might be termed apocalyptic nostalgia was among the most powerful motive-forces of the whole Merkabah mysticism...The depressing conditions of the period, the beginning of the era of persecution by the Church since the fourth century, directed the religious interests of the mystics towards the higher world of the Merkabah; from the world of history the mystic turns [either] to the prehistoric world of creation, from whose vision he seeks consolation, or towards the post-history of redemption.[47]

Peter Shaefer challenges Sholem's emphasis on apocalyptic nostalgia as a determining factor in what time period hekhalot literature was written. Rather, Shaefer focuses on the pseudepigraphical nature of the hekhalot literature:

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[45] Helios was also known by the Roman title, Sol Invictus (Invincible Sun). Lee Levine, ed., *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press) 9.
[46] Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) 373.
[47] Gershom Scholem *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc.) 72f.

> We are concerned here with a type of pseudepigraphical literature, which is related to Rabbinic literature in a way similar to that by which the biblical pseudepigrapha are related to the Bible. Our authors are not rabbis, but they attach great importance to the fact that what they say is authorized by the rabbis...For this reason it appears quite improbable to me that the goals and ideals propagated in this literature were developed at the same time as those of Rabbinic Judaism in the form of Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. In other words: The completely pseudepidraphical character of the hekhalot literature is an important argument for the assertion that this literature is in fact a post-Rabbinic phenomenon.[48]

According to Shaefer, we can assume hekhalot literature emerged from people on the fringes of rabbinic culture. Its authors were either Rabbis more experimental in their expression or an elite, well-educated class who knew the basics of rabbinic literature but sought an alternative expression of piety.

One evident aspect of hekhalot literature is its distinctiveness, as compared to Rabbinic literature:

> While one can describe Rabbinic literature in all its aspects as a dynamic interplay between scripture and tradition, between the written and oral Torah, precisely the opposite holds for the hekhalot literature. In spite of the fact that scriptural proofs are sometimes (though only seldom) employed, the hekhalot literature appears to be basically independent of the Bible.[49]

Though certain characteristics distinguish hekhalot literature from Rabbinic, we ultimately don't know who wrote it and exactly when it evolved. Despite these uncertainties, as we will see in a closer reading, hekhalot literature is key to unlocking the star symbolism within early Jewish texts.

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[48] Peter Schafer, "Gershom Scholem Reconsidered: The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," (12 Sacks Lecture, Oxford 1986) 293.
[49] Ibid., 290.

A classic text of hekhalot literature, 3 Enoch, stands as one indication of the way cosmological ideas permeated ancient Jewish culture.[50] In this work, Enoch is transformed from a priest on earth to an angel, Metatron.[51] Then God places him on a throne in the following description:

> Rabbi Ishmael said: The angel Metatron, Prince of the Divine Presence, the glory of highest heaven, said to me: Out of the abundant love and great compassion by which the Holy One, blessed be he, loved and cherished me more than all the denizens of the heights, he wrote with his finger, as with a pen of flame, upon the crown which was on my head, the letters by which heaven and earth were created; the letters by which seas and rivers were created; the letters by which mountains and hills were created; the letters by which stars and constellations, the lightning, winds, earthquakes, thunder, snow, hail...[52]

This text is notable for several reasons. Not only does Enoch discover the secret letters of all creation, but he is transformed into an angelic priest, a lesser God, cloaked in the blazing fire of the heavenly luminaries. In its time, this text came to symbolize the human ability to breach the boundary between heaven and earth, the attainment of cosmological wisdom, and a direct experience of God's abundant love. Enoch was no ordinary human, and he did transform into an angel. However, it is clear Enoch originated from earth, and if he could do this in the past, Rabbi Ishmael could also ascend in his celestial footsteps.

In this selection from 3 Enoch, God is depicted as a scribe, creating heaven and earth with God's finger that serves as a "pen of flame." We can imagine God sweeping

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[50] According to Magness, Babylonia terms are found throughout this text so it was likely redacted in the 5th/6th century in Babylonia: Jodi Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 59 (2005) 33, footnote 225.

[51] For possible origins of the name "Metatron" See Ibid., 32.

[52] Joseph Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain: An Anthology of Jewish Mystical Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 71.

this pen of fire across the expanse of the sky as He creates the stars and constellations, like a mighty scribe bringing forth Hebrew letters on a cosmic Torah scroll. Stars are rendered as powerful markers of God's handiwork and composed of the sacred letters of creation. The stars do not exist merely as a metaphor to illustrate the heavenly hosts, as we saw in the poetry of Kallir – rather, they are set within the grand configuration of the cosmos and can be accessed only through secret knowledge, accessible to the select few. Having discovered this secret knowledge, Enoch/Metatron, this human turned angel, shares in God's rule over the heavenly bodies and the constellations.

We can understand Enoch's epic journey to decipher the secrets of the Hebrew letters in our own context today as similar to the quest to discover a new scientific paradigm. To the thinkers of the ancient period, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet existed as atoms; they were the building blocks of the universe. Both the Rabbis and the authors of hekhalot literature believed the secrets of the universe were found by first unlocking the secrets of Torah. 3 Enoch shows us one method by which Jews in ancient times tried to do so, using the prism of their own 'scientific' reality.

As a final mystical text to consider, we turn to *Sefer Yetzira* (Book of Creation). *Sefer Yetzira* was "written by an unknown Jewish philosopher probably in the third century C.E., and became the most important work of Hebrew language and cosmology in the High Middle Ages, influencing centuries of scientists, philosophers, and mystics."[53] Among the major Jewish thinkers influenced by this key work, was Saadia Gaon, who wrote a commentary on the text. Unlike hekhalot literature, the focus is not on an ascent to a heavenly Temple. Instead, the main concern of *Sefer Yetzirah*'s author

[53] Joseph Dan, "The Language of Creation and Its Grammar," *Jewish Mysticism, vol 1: Late Antiquity* (Northvale NJ, 1998) 135.

is the intricacies of creation and developing a concrete understanding of the here and now. However, both hekhalot texts and *Sefer Yetzira* were seeking to re-establish unity between humans and the Divine after the Temple's destruction, one body of texts working with the heavenly realm, the other with the earthly. In *Sefer Yetzira*, the central assertion is that the Hebrew letters and their symbolic numbers can survive throughout time and serve as the building blocks by which we can find meaning outside the historical contours of Jewish time.

Again, let us return to Genesis Chapter 15, when Abraham looks up to the heavenly array of stars, which symbolize his future offspring. The following is from Chapter 6:7, the concluding chapter of *Sefer Yetzirah*:

> When Abraham, our father, may he rest in peace, looked, saw, understood, investigated, engraved and carved, and hewed, he succeeded in creation, as it is written, 'And the souls that they made in Haran' (Genesis 12:5). The Lord of all was revealed to him, may His name be blessed forever. And He placed him in His bosom, and kissed him on his head. He called him 'Abraham my beloved' (Isaiah 41:8). He made a covenant with him and with his children after him forever, as it is written 'And he trusted in the Lord, and he accounted it to him for righteousness' (Gen.15:6). He made with him a covenant between the ten toes of his feet—it is circumcision. He made with him a covenant between the ten fingers of his hands—it is language/the tongue. He bound twenty-two letters into his tongue, and the Holy One revealed to him the secret: He drew them out into water. He burned them into fire, He shook them into the air, He branded them into the seven [planets], He directed them into the twelve constellations.[54]

Abraham is the only authority figure mentioned in the entire work. In a manuscript of *Sefer Yetzirah* from the 10th century, Abraham is clearly made central when the following is stated in the introduction, "This is the book of the Letters of Abraham our father, which is called *Sefer Yetzirah*, and when one gazes (*tzafah*) into it, there is no limit to his

[54] Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah-The Book of Creation In Theory and Practice* (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 1997) 255-256.

wisdom."[55] According to the author, Abraham comes to understand the secret wisdom articulated in *Sefer Yetzirah*, and as a result, experiences union with God. It is not a coincidence that Genesis 15 is quoted in the concluding paragraph of *Sefer Yetzirah*. The author imagined Abraham achieved an expansive understanding when God pointed to the array of stars in the night sky in Genesis 15:5, a moment of illumination and mystical transformation.

The author specifically points to the constellations when describing how God embedded the sacred Hebrew letters into the fabric of creation. However, this is not the first time the zodiac is mentioned in *Sefer Yetzirah*. Chapter 5 begins with the following: "There are twelve *pshutot* (elements, plain meanings): Hey, Vav, Zayin, Chet, Tet, Yud, Lamed, Nun, Samekh, Eyin, Tzadi, Kuf." Each section of Chapter 5 defines the twelve elements further – the different directions of the universe, the twelve constellations, the twelve months, the twelve tribes, and twelve dimensions of the body and soul. Beginning with the widest view, i.e, the entire cosmos, to the most immediate, a single person, the author suggests that the zodiac signs serve as a point of entry to attain secret wisdom. On this, Aryeh Kaplan writes in his commentary of 5:10,

> If one wishes to attain a deep understanding of the significance of the astrological signs, one must contemplate the patterns of the stars that form each one. As one gazes at these stellar arrays, not only does the picture of the sign emerge, but one also gains insight into its inner essence...the constellations are said to be like a 'trough' because they channel spiritual sustenance down to the physical world.[56]

It is Kaplan's claim that *Sefer Yetzirah* served as a manual for students of meditative practices: "There is some evidence that these exercises were meant to strengthen the

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[55] Aryeh Kaplan, trans., *Sefer Yetzirah-The Book of Creation* (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 1997) x.
[56] Ibid., 219-220.

initiate's concentration, and were particularly helpful in the development of telekinetic and telepathic powers...this is supported by the talmudic references, which appear to compare the use of *Sefer Yetzirah* to a kind of white magic.[57] Regardless of exactly how this text may have been used by Jews practicing meditation, the book is further evidence of the widespread role of zodiac signs within early rabbinic mysticism.

Our examination of cosmological symbolism in rabbinic and early mystical texts suggests that no single position existed regarding the role of the zodiac in Jewish life. Some Rabbis retained their objection to astrology and continued to see this form of divination in negative terms, others were neutral on the subject, and a significant number adopted astrology as a dynamic way to uncover the mysteries of creation. After the fall of the Temple, understanding star symbolism became one method by which Jews held faith in the midst of the most dramatic changes in Jewish history. Most certainly, astrology was a known science in the day-to-day life of rabbis and the creators of hekhalot literature. What we can glean from these few texts is that astrological symbolism was ubiquitous in the ancient world – stars were everywhere!
Our next stop is the zodiac in synagogue design and art from this era as well.

[57] Ibid., xi.

Star Symbolism in Ancient Synagogue Art

Literary evidence from the Amoraic period suggests that both rabbinic and non-rabbinic circles were concerned with astrological symbolism. Archeological evidence supports this notion, for a multitude of Roman-Byzantine era synagogues in Israel feature the zodiac signs as a prominent motif. Let us consider the representation of the zodiac within three ancient synagogues (Hammath Tiberias, Ein Gedi and Beth-Alpha). What do the archeological remains tell us about one key way ancient Jews represented ideas and their identity within sacred space?

From the outset, I want to make clear the limitations, namely that we can only speculate as to what the motif of the zodiac meant to the Jews of late antiquity Palestine. Dr. Lee Levine speaks directly to our constraints:

> There can be little question that Jewish art includes many symbolic representations, and that any motif or depiction may well have multiple meanings, not only over the generations but also at any one time. However, given the limitations of our literary and archeological sources at present, any explanation remains largely speculative. If the issue is only what these depictions signify to us, their viewers and interpreters, some fifteen hundred years later, then all the above theories are engaging and welcome. If, however, the goal is to determine what the original intent was of those who made, paid for, or simply gazed at the images, then we simply do not have enough information to determine the truth of the matter.[58]

Despite Levine's caution, the appearance of the zodiac signs as a motif from the 4th-6th centuries remains a striking feature in the archeological and artistic landscape. Scholars have wondered why this particular design was so popular.

Located near the Sea of Galilee, the Hammath Tiberias archeological site is composed of several strata of synagogues, the original one dated to the 4th century. It

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[58] Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (second edition). (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 610.

stands as the earliest example of the centrality of zodiac signs in synagogue decoration. While many of the zodiac mosaics in ancient synagogues follow the same basic composition of Hammath Tiberias (Figure A), there are also subtle differences between them. Scholar Stephen Fine describes the synagogue's main mosaic:

> The zodiac of Hammath Tiberias is set within a square frame. A large ring, divided equally into twelve parts, contains one sign of the zodiac and is labeled as such in Hebrew. In the corners are female personifications of the seasons, each of which are also labeled. At the center, the god Helios rides through the heavens on a chariot drawn by four horses (a *quadriga*).[59]

The zodiac signs and the four seasons are coordinated – for example, the zodiac of the spring months are oriented to the spring season. The twelve signs are positioned counterclockwise, with Aries in the lead as the first month of spring. The heads of the zodiac figures are directed toward the center of the mosaic design, featuring the god Helios.[60] Helios is looking toward his uplifted right hand, in his left hand he is holding the globe, and there are rays emanating from a halo on his head. Likely, Helios personified the sun, the zodiac personified the stars, while the four seasons surrounding them both represented the yearly cycle and rhythms of sacred time. [61]

As we go deeper into these ancient mosaics, we find some trends representative of the community at large and others unique to the Jewish community. Jews were a minority culture, influenced by the Roman and Byzantine majority in which they lived, and this is noticeably so when we consider the synagogue art and architecture of ancient

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[59] Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World-Toward a New Jewish Archeology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 90.
[60] Rachel Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 228 (December 1977) 66.
[61] Lee Levine, ed., *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press) 67.

Palestine. Fine understands the architecture and art of Hammath Tiberias as reflecting what the majority culture considered to be a holy place: "This Jewish 'holy place' coalesces with general late antiquity forms – in its use of the basilical form, the mosaic, and even the imagery of the zodiac, the shape of the Torah shrine, and the use of dedicatory inscriptions. The donors called themselves by Greek names."[62] As an additional example of Fine's point, Rachel Hachlili finds Roman parallels to the mosaic floor of Hammath Tiberias, particularly in the mosaics of Antioch. According to Hachlili, the similarities in detail center on the depictions of the following at Hammath Tiberias:

> The season and the zodiacal signs of Scales (Libra), Archer (Sagittarius), Goat (Capricorn), Water-bearer (Aquarius), and the sun god. This likeness indicates a non-Jewish artist, probably of the Antioch school. The design of [Beth Alpha and Na'aran] floors, however, indicates that they were executed by Jewish artists because they used an iconography drawn from the literal meaning of the words archer (*kashat*) and water-bearer (*deli*), depicting them accordingly. This is clearly the case at Beth-Alpha, because the Jewish artist signed his work."[63]

The details Hachlili considers speak to the way artists of ancient mosaics integrated the style and motifs popular in their day, as well as details particular to Jewish culture.

A second example is the Ein Gedi synagogue mosaic (Figure B), found near the Dead Sea in the southern part of Roman-Byzantine Palestine, and dated to the mid-5th century. The Ein Gedi mosaic is especially intriguing because of its inscription, which reads as follows:

> Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared,
> Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noach, Shem, Ham and Japheth.

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[62] Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World-Toward a New Jewish Archeology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 91.
[63] Rachel Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 228 (December 1977) 66.

Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo
Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, and Aquarius, Pisces.
Nisan, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Av, Elul
Tishrei, Marheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat
and Adar Abraham Isaac Jacob. Peace...[64]

Interestingly, there are no depictions found of the zodiac figures, as there is in the Hammath Tiberius mosaic. Perhaps, those who frequented the Ein Gedi synagogue held a more conservative position vis-à-vis representing motifs inspired by Roman-Byzantine culture. This is not to suggest that the Ein Gedi Jews were staunchly particularistic in their outlook. Levine proposes, "the universally accepted zodiac signs are matched by a list of Hebrew months...The movement here is not only chronological, but also ties the general to the particular, the universal to the Jewish."[65] The Ein Gedi inscription adds to our overall picture, showing us the spectrum of influence that the greater culture played in the design of ancient synagogues. Like so many other places and time periods throughout Jewish history, Jews in Roman-Byzantine Palestine sought a careful balance between the particular and the universal in the design of their sacred gathering places.

Dated to the 6th century, Beth-Alpha in the Jezreel Valley is another important ancient synagogue (Figure C). Placed in a square frame, the Beth-Alpha zodiac is surrounded by the Four Seasons. The figure of Helios remains, but he is "more abstract and subdued. The depiction of [Hammath Tiberias's] sun god is natural and full featured, like a picture placed in the center of the frame. The sun god of Beth-Alpha, however, is integrated totally and harmonious with the rest of the design."[66] Rachel Wischnitzer

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[64] Lee Levine, ed., *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press) 140.
[65] Ibid.,143
[66] Rachel Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 228 (December 1977) 65-66.

notes that the style of Beth-Alpha is "more rigid, more truly Byzantine, anticipating European medieval art with its scholasticism and retreat from nature."[67] The difference in representation of Helios and the zodiac signs reflects changing aesthetics, with a deeper imprint of the Roman culture in Hammath Tiberias and the Byzantine style in Beth-Alpha. With these stylistic differences and contexts, Helios and the zodiac continued to capture the imagination of those who built synagogues in ancient Palestine over time.

In exploring this archeological evidence, a question emerges: Why would Jews place this mosaic so prominently in the design of their sacred space? Stephen Fine is one among several current scholars examining Jewish symbols in ancient synagogues. Specifically on the topic of the zodiac, Fine proposes that the zodiac motif was an assertion of a unique Jewish identity, an identity centered around the lunar-solar calendar as distinct from the Roman solar calendar: "Often based on local observation of the new moons and intercalation[68] of the year by individual communities (including Rabbis), the establishment of Jewish dates was an essential communal task throughout late antiquity."[69] The second argument is that "the zodiac was more than a calendar...It was a projection of the 'dome of heaven,' the place of the Divine court that is beseeched in prayer."[70] Fine continues,

> This closeness to the Divine realm is not merely that of humans reaching upward, but also of God and the angels reaching downward...this dome

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[67] Rachel Wischnitzer, "The Beth Alpha Mosaic: A New Interpretation." *Jewish Social Studies*, vol.17, no.2 (April 1955) 144.
[68] Since the Jewish calendar is a blend between a solar and lunar calendar, there is an intercalculated month (Second Adar) to keep the lunar and solar years aligned.
[69] Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World-Toward a New Jewish Archeology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 200.
[70] Ibid., 202.

> contained within it a plethora of associations and meanings. Some were related to the proximity between the Divine and human realms that is expressed in prayer, others to astrological prognostication, others to the calendar, and still others to the generic significance of time within Jewish culture.[71]

According to Fine, then, the zodiac served as a marker of a set of ideas. Most prominently, it was the visual meeting point between the earthly and heavenly realm, a marker to signify that the place where the community gathered was sacred.

The main focus, however, of Fine's book *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World--Toward a New Jewish Archeology* is not the zodiac motif in ancient synagogues. Jodi Magness, who more thoroughly examined the zodiac signs, directly challenged Fine's research in a review of his book: "Fine's explanation of Helios and the zodiac cycle – the most enigmatic and poorly understood motif in ancient synagogue art – is so fuzzy that it is meaningless...Fine does not add to our understanding of Helios and the zodiac cycle and provides no explanation of why six ancient Jewish communities chose to place this motif in the center of their synagogue buildings."[72] So, what does Magness propose is the explanation? According to Magness, the zodiac motif should be considered in the context of three factors: "the rise of Christianity, the emergence or strengthening of the Jewish priestly class in late antique Palestine; and the magical-mystical beliefs and practices described in the hekhalot literature."[73]

Beginning with the first factor, the rise of Christianity, Magness believes the zodiac motif in synagogues was similar, thought not identical, to the decorations

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[71] Ibid., 203-204.
[72] Jodi Magness, review of *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archeology* by Steven Fine, Bryn Mawr Classical Review April 5, 2006.
[73] Jodi Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Syangogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 59 (2005) 7.

represented in Christian churches at the time. She writes, "...By the fourth century, Christians conceived of the interior of a church building as a temple and as an image of the cosmos. Similarly, for Jews the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple was a representation of the Garden of Eden or Paradise, a place where heaven and earth were united."[74] Both Jews and Christians drew from earlier Near Eastern cosmological dome decoration[75] and both were re-interpreting the meaning of sacred space in a post-Temple world.

Where these two intertwined groups differ, however, centers on the prominent use of the zodiac motif in synagogues and not within churches. Magness attributes this in the following claim:

> Helios and the zodiac cycle are part of a mosaic program that represented, in two dimensions, a three-dimensional view of the cosmos: Helios in the Dome of Heaven above the earthly Temple (represented by the cultic furniture), sometime accompanied by scenes of sacrifice or prayer...For Christians, Jesus was a substitute for the sacrifices offered in the Temple, and the means by which they were offered salvation and atonement for their sins. For this reason, iconography associated with Jesus, sacrifices, and salvation (such as lamps, peacocks, and symbols of the Eucharist) dominates early Christian imagery...Because Jews rejected Jesus as a substitute for the Temple sacrifices, Temple imagery and allusions to the Temple festivals were selected for the synagogue mosaics. For Jews, Jesus did not supersede or replace the Temple sacrifices, which would one day be reinstated. In the interim, prayer in synagogues (not the acceptance of Jesus as the Christ) took the place of sacrifices...The association with Helios and the zodiac cycle with the sacrificial Temple cult may be one reason why this motif was not used in the decorative programs of contemporary Christian churches.[76]

According to Magness' argument, then, Jews used the motif of Helios and the zodiac cycle in synagogue decoration as a metaphor for the fallen Temple and as a symbol of

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[74] Ibid., 18.
[75] Ibid., 16. Sasanid Persian king Khusrau was supposedly surrounded by the zodiac in the dome of his throne room, symbolizing the cosmos.
[76] Ibid., 18.

hope for the rebuilding of a future one. This popular mosaic featured in the center of synagogues became one method by which a group of post-Temple Jews asserted their longing to experience and represent heaven on earth – to build a portal to the heavenly realm – in their sacred gathering places. But not only this: post-Temple Jews wanted to distinguish themselves from their Christian neighbors, as Christianity developed and grew.

The second argument proposed by Magness, that a Jewish priestly class directly influenced the use of the zodiac motif in synagogues, is set within several assertions as to who assembled in these ancient synagogues and for what purpose. We know that the rabbis of the Mishnah did not frequent early synagogues, which served as gathering places (*batei knesset*) for debate and other communal activities. Instead, Rabbis formed *havurot* in *batei midrash* scattered throughout Palestine where they celebrated Shabbat and festivals, developed liturgy and, mostly, studied. According to Levine, the leadership in the synagogues, by contrast, "were not restricted to a single caste or socio-religious group. In principle, anyone could head the institution. Priests may have played a central role in its religious affairs as well, owing to their knowledge and experience in liturgical matters."[77] By the 3rd or 4th century, when prayer become more of a focus among the Rabbis, they essentially co-opted existing synagogues and there arose a struggle for control between those already involved in the development of these synagogues and the Rabbis. Ultimately, the Rabbis won, but this does not mean that the descendents of

[77] Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (second edition). (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 2.

Zadokite priests didn't continue to play a role. Magness points to archeological evidence that suggests priests made donations to synagogues, such as Na'aran and Sepphoris.[78]

If priests were central figures in the development of synagogues in the Roman-Byzantine era, why would Helios and the zodiac figures hold particular significance for them? The centrality of the sun god Helios, depicted as riding on a chariot while governing the cosmos in the archeological remains of Hammath Tiberias, Beth-Alpha, among others, is, perhaps, a link to the theories posited by such scholars as Rachel Elior explored in the previous section (i.e, that the hekhalot literature, with its roots in Qumran, is directly connected to priests who supported a solar calendar). The ancient mosaics featuring Helios might originally have represented a 'campaign' to govern Jewish life by a solar calendar. By the time the Rabbis gained control over synagogues, Helios could have been submerged into a general association between the zodiac motif and the fallen Temple.

When considering the context within which the zodiac motif emerged, there is an inherent limitation in Magness' third factor, i.e "the magical-mystical beliefs and practices described in the hekhalot literature." As argued in the previous section, we are not entirely sure when to place the writing of hekhalot literature. Magness predominantly follows Rachel Elior's research, which sets an earlier date for the formation of hekhalot literature, but it could have emerged in a post-rabbinic period. If this is so, then it is surely difficult to establish the creation of the zodiac motif in Roman-Byzantine synagogues within the emergence of hekhalot literature. Magness does take note of the wide span of time within which hekhalot literature is believed to have been written. She

[78] Jodi Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Syangogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 59 (2005) 22.

does indicate the possibility that earlier mystical traditions later redacted into hekhalot literature only in the early Middle Ages.[79] As an example, the central figure of Helios in the ancient synagogue zodiac motif could have represented a nascent version of the angel Metatron, described centuries later in hekhalot texts.

The current theories proposed by Magness and others as to why Jews would place this mosaic so prominently in the design of their sacred space is fascinating, but as I explore the material, one idea keeps returning to my mind. In contrast to today, prayer was entirely oral, and it was not until the ninth century that a comprehensive Jewish prayerbook appeared (Seder Rav Amram).[80] I can only imagine how the decoration on synagogue walls was all the more significant to a population that did not rely on prayerbooks! Was art a way to trigger liturgical recitation? Stories? Collective memories? Fine focuses on the connection between the images of the zodiac and liturgy:

> While it is doubtful that a continuity of Jewish art existed, the impulse to illustrate synagogue floors and later liturgical, magical, and astrological texts (not to mention ceremonial objects and synagogue walls) with zodiac themes that were common to the liturgy seen to be phenomenologically related.[81]

As we know from the selected rabbinic and hekhalot texts reviewed in the previous section, zodiac signs figured into the literary imagination in a variety of ways. The decoration of the ancient synagogues is not just further evidence for what we find in rabbinic and non-rabbinic texts. Rather, as Fine suggests, there was a synergy between ancient liturgy and artistic expression. One way we might relate to the experience of

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[79] Jodi Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Syangogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 59 (2005) 30.
[80] Lawrence Hoffman, "Liturgy I" (lecture, January 30, 2008).
[81] Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World-Toward a New Jewish Archeology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 201.

these ancient Jews is to imagine how we immediately associate High Holiday melodies and nusach to the unique prayers of the season. Just a few notes can associate liturgy with the time of year. So too, I believe, the Jews who entered into Hammath Tiberias, Beth-Alpha and Ein Gedi connected the pictorial landscape to their liturgical one.

I remember praying with my rabbinical school class during our year in Israel among the ancient remains of Tzippori. Before me lay a magnificent mosaic floor and I recall looking at the numerous designs, crafted so many years ago, as the words of my ancestors enveloped me in prayer. History pervades the air in Israel, and the ancient stones carry the weight of the past. While I didn't know it at the time, my trip to ancient synagogues, like Tzippori, have stayed with me. Precisely the connection between liturgy and art that I suggest here is what eventuated in my undertaking the current study, some five years later.

From the Medieval Period to the Present

European Synagogue Art and Design in the Medieval Period[82]

Early medieval synagogues were simple, particularly ones in small towns. Describing most eleventh- and twelfth-century synagogues in Europe, Carol Herselle Krinsky writes:

> Synagogues of this type were located on upper floors in the homes of men who found it honorable or prestigious—and possibly profitable—to have a synagogue. The rooms were simple spaces furnished with a bimah and a niche or chest for the ark.[83]

The simplicity of these synagogues were in part because of limited financial resources, but also because of ongoing persecution and expulsion. The Jewish community lived in a state of constant resettlement. Later, the medieval synagogue became more multi-functional. A center of Jewish life, the synagogue housed the community school, *mikveh*, courtroom, matzah bakery, and social hall, among other communal institutions.[84]

The social and cultural realities of the medieval period made the existence of communal institutions precarious, to the point where there are "virtually no Jewish monuments (synagogues, cemeteries, other buildings) prior to 1500."[85] Most synagogues were destroyed, burnt to the ground, in the crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries, or confiscated and turned into churches. For example, when Philip the Fair ordered the

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[82] A detailed examination of the zodiac motif through different periods of history does not fall under the scope of this paper, however, it is worth offering a brief picture of synagogue decoration in the Middle Ages before delving into the Modern Period.
[83] Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe-Architecture, History, Meaning* (Architectural History Foundation and The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1985) 44.
[84] Ronald L. Eisenberg, *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004) 319.
[85] Norman Roth, ed., *Medieval Jewish Civilization: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 624.

expulsion of Jews from France in 1307, the synagogues of France were "either sold or given away [...] One of those in Paris [was] presented by the king to his coachmen."[86] The one surviving synagogue from the medieval period is The Altneuschul (Old-New Synagogue) in Prague, built around 1270 (Figure D).[87]

Jews in Ashkenazic Europe depended on founding charters between the Jewish community and the gentile authorities who offered protection and limited autonomy. There existed formal demarcations between Jews and Christians, as each town contained a separate section:

> The Christian one was governed by a municipal council and magistrate court, functioning according to municipal law. The Jewish one was administered by a communal council *(kahal),* which derived its authority from privileges granted by the king or the magnate owner as well as from Jewish tradition. Both of these apparatuses were subordinate to the supervisory authority of the king's or owner's representative; neither could legally compel the other.[88]

Despite these charters offer of protection, persecutions often became intolerable for Jews in Germany. French Jews were expelled by 1390, but German Jewry remained, largely because there was no central authority with the capacity to expel Jews, as there was in French and Spain. By the 16th century, Jews of Germany headed East to Poland and Lithuania in pursuit of economic opportunities and greater social stability.

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[86] *Jewish Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Medieval Synagogues." Accessed December 20, 2010, http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1212&letter=S&search=medieval%20synagogue#3899.

[87] Only part of the existing building is from the medieval period. It was partially destroyed in a fire and then later rebuilt. *Yivo Encyclopedia Online*, s.v "Medieval Synagogues." Accessed December 20, 2010, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org:80/article.aspx/Prague.

[88] *Yivo Encyclopedia Online*, s.v "Middle Ages." Accessed Decemeber 20, 2010, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Relations_between_Jews_and_Non-Jews/Historical_Overview#id0ehqbg.

In response to the devastating crusades, there arose in Franco-Germany a small but influential group of Jews known for their extreme piety, elitism, and esoteric mystical ideas – the Chasidei Ashkenaz (German Pietists). Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (1176-1238) and Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, also known as the Maharam, (1215-1293) are two of the most prominent rabbis of the German Pietists. The German Pietists claimed a lineage extending from the Kalonymous family, as Eleazar of Worms asserts in the following:

> They received the secret of ordering the prayers and the other secrets from Abu Aaron...who came to Lombardy, to the city of Lucca, where he found R.Moshe [ben Kalonymos], who wrote the 'Eimat nora'otekhah and passed onto him all the secrets. He was R.Moshe ben Kalonymos ben R.Meshullum ben R.Kalonymos ben R.Yehudah. He was the first to leave Lombardy, he and his sons R.Kalonymos and R.Yequtiel, and his cousin R.Itiel, and other worthy people whom King Charles brought with him from Lombardy and settled in Mainz. There they flourished [until 1096]. Then we were wiped out, except for a few who remained of our family [our relatives], along with R.Kalonymos the Elder. He passed [the secrets] on to R.Eleazar, the Hazzan of Speyer, as we wrote, and R.Eleazar...to R.Samuel the Pietist, and [then] to R.Judah the Pietist [his son]. From him, I [his cousin] received the secrets of prayer and other secrets.[89]

The German Pietists established a link between themselves and the prominent Kalonymos family, the founders of the Ashkenazic tradition. Like the merkavah mystics, the German Pietists believed that among the greater majority of the Jewish community, they alone preserved ancient mystical practices and ideas, known through carefully gathering and copying mystical texts. They drew from hekhalot literature, in particular,

But the German Pietists did not simply depend on the past; nor were they mere tradents of what they had inherited. They were also innovators in their own right, creating ideals upon which they built a vision that had a broad social influence. To the mystical texts of the Yordei Merkavah, for example, they added their own elaborations.

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[89] Kenneth R. Stow, *Alienated Minority-The Jews of Medieval Latin Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 123.

In the excerpt above, for instance, Eleazar of Worms mentions "the secrets of prayers." This refers to the idea held among German Pietists that one could be transformed into his most perfected self by knowing the deeper meanings behind the Hebrew letters and names for God. The different names of God were secret seals possessing a magical power that could unlock levels of knowledge. One particular example can be found in *Sefer Hashem* (written around 1220), in which Eleazar of Worms describes the secret ceremony whereby a magical name is shared from teacher to student:

> YHWH-His unique, glorious, and awesome name...It is transmitted only over water, as it is written, 'The voice of the Lord is over the waters' (Psalm 29:3). Before the master teaches his disciples they should bathe in water and immerse themselves in [the ritual bath that measures] forty se'ah. They should don white clothes and fast on the day he will teach them [the name], and they should stand in the water up to their ankles. Then the master opens his mouth in fear and says: Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, king of the universe, Lord, God of Israel, You are one and Your name is one, and You have commanded us to conceal Your great name, for Your name is awesome...
>
> A student is taught God's name by ritual cleansing, dressing in white, fasting, standing in water and then learning the secret name from his teacher, over the surface of the water.[90]

In this passage from *Sefer Hashem* we find an example of how Chasidei Ashkenaz added an altogether novel ascetic and devotional intensity to Franco-German tradition.

In the fifth chapter of his commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*, Eleazar of Worms explores astrology. He associates several of the archangels with the twelve signs of the zodiac: Aries-Michael, Taurus-Gabriel, Gemini-Raphael, Cancer-Uriel, Leo-Guriel,

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[90] Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through A Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 239-240.

Virgo-Nuriel, Libra-Yeshamiel, Sagittarius-Ayil, Capricornus-Ubaviel, etc.[91] Eleazar chose to focus on the connection between the archangels and the zodiac for several reasons. One, the Chasidei Ashkenaz believed they could be transformed into angel-like figures though prayer and through the acquisition of secret knowledge – as exemplified by the story of Enoch becoming Metatron. Trancelike states brought about by ascetic practices were described as enabling Chasidei Ashkenaz to ascend to the heavens. There, they would join in the heavenly chorus and become like angels. Thus, Eleazar of Worms focused on the connection between the angels and the zodiac signs with the experience of heavenly ascent in mind.

We find an additional dimension to Eleazar's understanding of angels in his work, *Sefer Raziel* (*The Book of Raziel*). Within *Sefer Raziel*, Eleazar describes a world teeming with angels and demons. God sends angels to enact His will, in the course of which, every person has a *malach mazal*, an angel of destiny, who brings about good or evil.[92] Clearly, Eleazar of Worms believed astrology played a role in day-to-day life. He had picked up much of this lore from antiquity – as we saw in our examination of cosmological symbolism in rabbinic and early mystical texts, astrology was a known entity, taken seriously by the rabbinic establishment and elite Jews. That tradition passed easily into the medieval period, with continuing appeal to the rabbis of the time who articulated theological ideas dependent on them.

Meir of Rothenburg lived a century after Eleazar of Worms. As a fourth generation German Pietist, he stands as a well-known historical figure directly impacted

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[91] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 251.
[92] *Jewish Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Angelology" Accessed December 20, 2010, http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1521&letter=A#ixzz1BUvrQWxy.

by the social tumult in 13th century Franco-Germany. Meir carried the mystical tradition beyond the Rhineland, established himself as the teacher to many, and, eventually (for reasons we do not fully understand), was seized and held captive by the Holy Roman emperor of the time. Legend has it that the Jews tried to pay for the Maharam's release but he forbade the transaction, lest more rabbis be imprisoned and their lives ransomed. Sadly, the Maharam died in his cell seven years after his capture.[93]

Meir's writings on decorative art are particularly relevant to the topic at hand. The issue of synagogue design was ever present, and by Meir's time, had become quite controversial:

> Images appeared in synagogues [in the eleventh and twelfth centuries], when figurative art was widely used by the church. Most of what we know about synagogue art is gleaned from legal texts, which preserve the few surviving notices of it. They record varied opinions about the admissibility of images, their contents, and their location...[94]

A debate ensued among rabbis as to the value of decorative art. Although Krinsky does not make specific mention of the zodiac motif in synagogues of this time period, by extension, we can assume the debates between rabbis covered this topic. The Maharam states in the *Tosafot* of Yoma 54a, "I was asked about art within prayerbooks, images of birds and beasts...Surely, it is not good..." Accordingly, the Maharam "preferred not to have images of figures on synagogue walls, and did not want to see birds and beasts decorating prayer books. He disapproved of paintings of any sort on the synagogue's

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[93] Howard Schwartz, *Leaves from the Garden of Eden: 100 Classic Jewish Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 342.
[94] Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe-Architecture, History, Meaning* (Architectural History Foundation and The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1985) 44.

focal wall, where they provided distraction from prayer. Plant decorations [were] the only ornaments at Worms and Prague-Altneuschul in central Europe."[95]

The Maharam's opinion became the majority one, and until the seventeenth century, plant decoration and nonfigurative ornamentation were the predominant trend.[96] Both Eleazar of Worms and Meir of Rothenburg considered astrology a viable form of "science"; and many shared their view. And yet, the zodiac motif diminished during the medieval period, as did much of synagogue decoration. This was a trend, not a permanent diminishment, for the seventeenth century brought decorative art back into synagogue design, and the same design trends continued through the modern period – as we will see in the next section.

[95] Ibid., 46.
[96] Ibid., 46.

European Synagogue Art and Design in the Modern Period

Among the renewed design motifs appearing from the seventeenth century was the zodiac, which re-emerged with great popularity. This continued into the modern era. The Mogilev synagogue in Russia, the Chodorow synagogue in the Ukraine (Figure F), and the Gwozdzeic synagogue in Poland are just a few examples (now most are destroyed). Upon walking into the Gwozdzeic synagogue, one would be surrounded by a richly decorated interior – intricate designs of vegetation, animals, the text of Hebrew prayers, geometric compositions, and the zodiac in the upper-most part of the ceiling, all in vibrant and deep colors.

As discussed, the zodiac was a marker of sacred time. Liz Elsby explains, "When a Jew would walk into the synagogue, and beheld all of the signs of the zodiac, he or she would get a sense of the rhythm of the entire Jewish year, and the associations of various festivals which would be celebrated under each of the symbols."[97] But there is an added historical and cultural context that provides a deeper layer of understanding to these decorated interiors. According to Carol,

> Complex currents of Jewish thought at the time—legal, mystical, superstitious, astrological—found aesthetic expression in these buildings. Cultural cohesion fostered the development of Jewish legend and folklore. The experience of false messiahs, persecutions, and ephemeral prosperity combined with happier moments, and the result was a plentiful background of images and ideas from daily life to mix with those derived from religious tradition and pious legend.[98]

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[97] Liz Elsby, "Behold All That Was Painted My Hand Has Wrought": The Wooden Synagogue of Chodorow." *Yad Vashem Online Education and E-Learning*, http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/16/chodorow.asp.

[98] Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe-Architecture, History, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) 56.

Carol speaks to a myriad of historical and cultural realities that influenced the re-emergence of decorative expression. Thomas Hubka, however, questions such ready explanations, believing that in part, at least, we cannot know the fullness of the story behind the renaissance of synagogue artistry:

> Following the Second World War, scholarly interpretations of wall-paintings could be divided into two schools of thought. One approach continued to emphasize the influence of regional, non-Jewish precedents, while the other interpreted the paintings as an indigenous Jewish art form, often with messianic overtones...In this first approach, the wall-painting were seen as a minor folk art that was a direct product of its Eastern-European cultural context. On the other hand, those who emphasized messianic influences saw the wall-paintings less as a contextually derived art form and more as a distinctively Jewish art produced by pre-emancipated, Ostjuden, shtetl Jewry. The inspiration of these distinctively Jewish paintings was often attributed to the negative pressures of impoverishment, progroms, and exile, which were in turn linked to messianic themes in Judaism...Although general themes related to Jewish art and legends are clearly discernable, the specific contextual meaning of the vast majority of images in the wall-painting...remains largely unexplained.[99]

I will touch upon several of the aforementioned trends raised by Carol – false messiahs, Lurianic mysticism, and folk traditions, believing that to some degree, each could have played a part in the background of eastern European synagogue design, but let us also consider Hubka's caution. Indeed, we have limited information as to the exact meaning behind these decorations, created hundreds of years ago.

The experience of false messiahs refers to a series of movements from the mid-seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, primarily the movement surrounding Shabbatai Zvi, described as "the largest and most momentous messianic movement in Jewish history subsequent to the destruction of the Temple and the Bar Kokhba

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[99] Thomas C. Hubka, *Resplendent Synagogue-Architecture and Worship in an Eighteenth Century Polish Community* (NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003) 84.

Revolt."[100] Sabbateanism has long been held to have emerged out of the desperation that ensued following the Chmilenicki massacres in Poland (1648-1657). But since the classic work of Gershom Scholem, it has been commonplace to say that at least as important as this great tragedy, it was the flourishing of Lurianic Kabbalah in and of itself that promoted the success of Shabbetai's messianic career:

> Lurianic Kabbalah proclaimed an intimate bond between the religious activity of the Jew as he performs the commandments of the law and meditations for prayer and the messianic message. All being has been in exile since the very beginning of creation and the task of restoring everything to its proper place has been given to the Jewish people, whose historic fate and destiny symbolize the state of the universe at large.[101]

The belief that redemption was close at hand created an environment ripe for a figure purported to be the messiah. It was into this context Shabbatai Zvi entered and even after his dramatic exit – when he opted to convert to Islam instead of facing immediate death -- Sabbateanism continued.

Whereas the German Pietists called for minimal aesthetic features within synagogue space and prayerbook decoration, the rise of Lurianic Kabbalah and its messianic expectations inspired the opposite. The flourishing of synagogue design "gave the synagogue a more sumptuous and energetic character than it had had earlier."[102] Synagogue wall paintings "functioned as a visual layer of artistic liturgy reflective of the rabbinic establishment,"[103] one deeply influenced by messianic and mystical ideas. In Eastern European towns that were impoverished and stricken with pogroms, synagogue

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[100] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v., "Shabbetai Zevi." (Macmillan Reference, 2006) 1219.
[101] Ibid., 1219.
[102] Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe-Architecture, History, Meaning.* (Architectural History Foundation and The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1985) 50.
[103] Thomas C. Hubka, *Resplendent Synagogue-Architecture and Worship in an Eighteenth Century Polish Community* (NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003) 86.

decoration expressed counter-hopes of deliverance, particularly through concentrating not on the difficult life Jews led here on earth, but on the mystical beyond. Artistic decor helped demarcate the physical world from the mystical one.

It was not just official rabbinic teaching that mattered here. Stories and folks traditions played their own part, especially because folk beliefs flourished everywhere, among Jews as well as non-Jews. For Jews, however well aware that they were still considered "other" by the greater community, folk markers of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness were widely celebrated as central to Jewish identity. This folklore influenced Jewish culture on multiple levels – art, music, medicine, dance, oral and literary expression. David Roskies imagines this life in the following:

> The Jews of Central and Eastern Europe are a people of storytellers. Men went off to pray three times daily; between afternoon and evening prayers, they swapped a tale or two. On the Sabbath and holidays they returned to the study house or synagogue to hear a maggid, an itinerate preacher, weave stories into lengthy sing-song sermons...At home or in the marketplace, women drew their own repertory of stories from life and from moral tracts...[104]

Perhaps Roskies tends toward the romantic in his description of the Eastern Europe shtetl, but the main point is to illustrate the strong cultural cohesion cemented by the shared experience of Jewish folklore. Amidst persecutions, poor economic conditions and messianic expectations, stories and legends inspired hope. According to Carol, they also animated the visual tapestry within synagogue interiors.

Carol focuses on historical and cultural realities unfolding in Eastern Europe at the time, but Hubka proposes that the motifs in question stretch back to the medieval period in Ashkenaz:

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[104] Dan Ben-Amos and Dov Noy, eds., *Folktales of the Jews: Tales from Eastern Europe*, vol.2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007) xxvi.

> This longevity of artistic tradition can readily be seen in the pre-modern or late-medieval Ashkenazi vocabulary of wall-painting motifs. It was a vocabulary that had been maintained for hundreds of years by Polish-Jewish artists who generally worked outside the major schools of Polish and Eastern-European art...the isolation of Jewish liturgical artistic development helps to explain many of the archaic features that appear in the seventeenth and eighteenth century synagogue paintings.[105]

For Hubka, the Eastern European synagogue paintings demonstrate a communal commitment to preserving pre-modern motifs. This occurred partly out a sense of reverence for the past, but most notably because Jewish artists were not accepted into the greater artistic community.

We know that medieval synagogue decoration was limited by the puritanical views of the German Pietists. Rabbis such as Eleazar of Worms and the Maharam called for minimal artistic design. How, then, could Hubka be correct in seeing the renaissance of synagogue art as basically continuation of older traditions? Something novel must have been added by the seventeenth century, when these motifs begin recurring again. Put another way, we are not just entitled, but forced to ask what ultimately led to the flourishing of synagogue decorative art in the modern period. Carol's theories are on point, then, in that she insists that we consider what important historical and cultural shifts may have led to the upsurge in synagogue decoration. But in the end, neither Carol nor Hubka provides us with the ultimate answers. However, as we shift our focus West, they do provide an essential context for an exercise in comparison between Eastern and Western European synagogues.

The motifs celebrated in Eastern Europe came to be seen as superstitious and contradictory to Western European Jewish identity. In contrast to the world of Eastern

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[105] Thomas C. Hubka, *Resplendent Synagogue-Architecture and Worship in an Eighteenth Century Polish Community* (NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003) 112.

European Jewry, we find the diminishment of the zodiac motif within Western European synagogues. Why did this happen? With the onset of the Enlightenment era, dramatic cultural and historical changes developed within Western Europe. Specifically, the shift in the purpose and meaning of Judaism in the context of modern life transformed places of worship. Early Reform Jews sought to depict a new Jewish identity within their holy sanctuaries.

What later became known as the Reform Movement, developed directly out of the Enlightenment and the possibility for Jews to participate as emancipated citizens in Germany. The first steps in achieving this were to focus on reforming Jewish practice by adopting more universal, modern European values, which Jewish reformers considered already deeply integrated into Christian practice. Thinkers and participants in these foundational years were disciples of Hegelian thought. They viewed themselves as standing "at the 'end of history' [in that] the spirit of their age was achieving the consummation of all historical truths."[106] The study of history was believed by reformers too to be the secret to achieving a new form of Judaism, the next Hegelian chapter in Judaism, as it were. In their view, history could "unthaw" the rabbinic tradition so centered on Talmudic literature and unconcerned with examining the historical accuracy of divinely inspired texts. Based on these ideas, there arose the school of thought called *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

While many believed that the historical approach was central to future Jewish thought, there was no universal agreement as to the nature and shape of the future of Judaism. Generating passionate resistance from those who defended medieval Judaism

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[106] Jacob Neusner, *Understanding American Judaism-Toward the Description of a Modern Religion* (NY: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1995) 13.

as "traditional," individuals in the nascent Reform movement, such as Abraham Geiger, promoted the view that history was the liberating force for Jews intent on moving beyond their medieval past. This perspective is reflected in an 1836 letter from Abraham Geiger to Joseph Derenbourg, one the founders of *Wissenschaft* in France:

> ...Alas, we still cleave so horribly fast to the exterior works, and when the blow that will strike the religious world falls . . . we shall have to fling ourselves into the arms of the new era without having had any significant part in bringing it about...But the course to be taken, my dear fellow, is that of critical study; the critical study of individual laws, the critical examination of individual documents – this is what we must strive for...For the love of Heaven, how much longer can we continue this deceit, to expound the stories of the Bible from the pulpits over and over again as actual historical happenings, to accept as supernatural events of world import stories which we ourselves have relegated to the realm of legend, and to derive teachings from them or, at least, to use them as the basis for sermons and texts? How much longer will we continue to pervert the spirit of the child with these tales that distort the natural good sense of tender youth? But how can this be changed? By driving such falsehoods into a corner, of course; by clearly revealing this paradox both to ourselves and to others; by pursuing into their secret hiding places all those who could seek to evade the issue, and thus eventually helping to bring about the great cave-in which will bury an old world beneath its ruins and open a new world for us in its place...[107]

In Geiger's view, Judaism had to be completely tied to the modern spirit of inquiry and scientific thought. If not, Judaism would be lost to the new "Messianic" era of science, which he saw as quickly eclipsing the traditional ways of the past. This is a key point in regards to the zodiac as a motif in synagogue decoration, for the zodiac became associated with a pre-scientific consciousness. Theories on stars and the solar system, superstitious ideas that could somehow govern the future, mystical ascents to the heavenly realm, all of this represented by the zodiac was viewed as contrary to a more

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[107] Daniel H. Frank, ed. *Jewish Philosophy Reader*. (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2000) 377. (quoting M. Wiener (ed.), *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaisim: The Challenge of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962).

"developed" Western consciousness. By contrast, the symbols and decorative elements, that constituted the overall aesthetic in synagogue design needed to represent Judaism in step with modern ideals of inquiry and progress.

With the emergence of modernity and the defining of Judaism solely in religious terms, the synagogue took on a more singular, religious function. Whereas before the nineteenth century it was believed that the synagogue building itself did not contain an inherent sanctity, within the Reform movement, the building came to be seen as a place of holy reverence. The synagogue was conceived as:

> A 'sanctuary' in two senses: a place of holiness separate from the secular world and a place of refuge from it...this spatial distinction between holy and profane was associated in Judaism with the ancient Temple, generally not with the synagogue. For millennia the Jewish distinction had been temporal, not spatial...in re-introducing spatial sanctity, the preachers were not simply following the cultural code of contemporary Christianity, they were returning to the paradigm of ancient Judaism.[108]

German Architects built synagogues with "facades that set them apart from their secular urban surroundings, and outfitted them internally with dominating sanctuaries."[109] The architectural aesthetics were not there purely for the sake of art, but were intended to reflect valued inner qualities, such as orderliness and reverence. Worshipers entered these sacred structures, termed *Gotteshaus* ("God's house"), with a sense of awe and decorum. Prayers offered by worshipers and sermons delivered by clergy were believed to be an "edification of the spirit, ennoblement of the heart, and the awakening of the

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[108] Michael A. Meyer, "'How Awesome is this Place!' The Reconceptualization of the Synagogue in Nineteenth-Century Germany." *Leo Baeck Yearbook* 41 (1996) 59.
[109] Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Synagogues and American Spirituality." *Synagogue Architecture in America: Faith, Spirit and Identity* (Australia: Image Publishing, 2004) 78.

spirit to true virtue and morality."[110] Within this context, the zodiac became a symbol antithetical to the Judaism German Jews sought to establish in their time.[111]

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[110] Michael A. Meyer, "'How Awesome is this Place!' The Reconceptualization of the Synagogue in Nineteenth-Century Germany." *Leo Baeck Yearbook* 41 (1996) 61.

[111] Although the zodiac was no longer used, this is not to say that star symbolism was altogether dismissed. In fact, the Star of David figured widely within German Jewish synagogues: "The hexagram is now believed to have become an emblem of Jewishness in Prague around the year 1600. By no means, however, was its usage ever confined to Jews. [Indeed, it was used in the early medieval period by Muslims too – and called the Star of Solomon. As to Christians] the symbol can still be found as part of the emblem of the Order of Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, on stained-glass windows in the (Anglican) Church of the Redeemer in Toronto, and of course on every American dollar bill and as the shape of the standard American sheriff's badge. It was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Germany that the shield of David became a distinguishing religious marker of Judaism. Scholars believe that newly emancipated German Jews adopted the symbol to stand opposite the cross that so visibly symbolized Christianity. German immigrants brought this new 'symbol of Judaism' with them to America, and in 1845 the shield of David made its first architectural appearance, built into the windows of the new Baltimore Hebrew Congregation synagogue building Har Sinai." Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 106.

Today, we associate the Star of David with so many uses, not only synagogue design -- the State of Israel flag, necklace pendants and Judaica. It has become second nature, dare I say stereotypical, to raise the Star of David (Magen David) as an emblem of Jewish hope and pride. But rarely do we stop to think, where did this symbol actually come from? According to Michael Berkowitz, "In the 19th century, the main meaning of the Magen David, the Shield or Star of David was still fluid—a five or six pointed star (they were used almost indiscriminately by Jewish sources) was linked as a symbol in mysticism and general European philosophical thinking. The fact that the symbol had been used earlier by [followers of] the ill-fated Shabbatei Tzvi...and Jewish and non-Jewish amulet makers (both east and west) did not seem to matter. The Star of David was not a major symbol in the Reform and [Conservative] movements of the 19th century but oddly enough the Rothschild family coat of arms chose to use it when they were ennobled in Austria. Heinrich Heine uses it perhaps as a mixed metaphor (of universalism and particularism) in 1840 but it was not until the end of the century that the symbol became of singular importance. The first issue (June 4, 1897) of Herzl's Die Welt uses it on the masthead in a clear attempt at creating a national 'symbol.'" Michael Berkowitz, ed., *Nationalism, Zionism and Ethnic Mobilization of the Jews in 1900 and Beyond* (Brill, 2004) 287.

Historians Jonathan Sarna and Michael Berkowitz trace the modern use of the Star of David to several factors. Following Scholem, Sarna suggests the Star of David functioned as a new symbol for emancipated German Jews who wanted a decorative symbol in their synagogues that could "stand opposite the cross." Berkowitz emphasizes

Establishing Life in America

Waves of Eastern European Jews immigrated to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to historian Hasia R. Diner, during the first half of the nineteenth century, American Jews "were taking steps toward reconciling the realities of their mobility with the society's mixed signals about their place in the life of the nation. The Jews simultaneously experienced welcome and rejection, embrace and disdain, opportunity and restriction, dramatic success and discrimination."[112] Within these tensions, the synagogue played a pivotal role in both preserving and re-imagining Jewish life. As the realities and status changed for Jewish immigrants over the generations, so did the synagogues that housed them.

About 85 percent of Jewish immigrants came through the port of New York and most stayed and established tight-knit communities throughout the area.[113] Some of these communities sought to re-create synagogues that harkened back to the world from which they came. For example, the Bialystoker Synagogue (Figure G) in the heart of the Lower East Side of New York City features decorations from the traditional synagogues of Russia, Ukraine and Poland. The Ansche Kenesset Bialystok, founded in 1878 by a group of Jewish immigrants from Bialystok, Poland, bought the Willett Street Methodist Church (built in 1824) in 1905 and converted the church into the synagogue we see

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the effort on the part of early Zionists to establish a national symbol. Whether driven by religious or national motives, it is at least in part ironic that Jews of Western Europe regarded the zodiac as superstitious, and instead, the Star of David was embraced. In fact, the five-pointed and six-pointed star share roots with the zodiac signs in the pre-modern consciousness.

[112] Hasia R. Diner, *Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000.* (Ewing, NJ: University of California Press, 2004) 206.

[113] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 153.

today. The Bialystoker is a historical landmark – the stone façade remains unchanged from the original and the interior sanctuary is immaculately preserved.

Walking into the synagogue, I felt as if I had entered into the past. Men were folding their *tallesim* after morning prayers and opening books to being their *beit midrash* studies. I walked up a creaking staircase, from the lower level to the sanctuary and was enveloped by elaborate design. Richard McBee describes the interior in the following:

> Floral and geometrical borders ring the walls and landscapes depicting the Land of Israel punctuate the foyer and grace the walls both under and over the balconies. When you raise your eyes heavenward you are confronted with more colorful designs, painted swags, and Corinthian columns everywhere you look. The large painted ceiling creates the illusion of being open to a sunlit sky dotted with puffy clouds and incongruous stars. And ringing this riot of images is an elaborate and beautiful depiction of the twelve signs of the zodiac crowning the main sanctuary.[114]

Most prominent of the Bialystoker's interior designs are the zodiac signs, decorating the ceiling that encircle the congregation. Visible in every direction, the zodiac signs are set within columns with a sky painted in the background.

The Hebrew monthly equivalents are written alongside the astrological signs in an orderly composition. Tishrei is linked to Libra, Elul to Virgo, Nissan to Aries, Sivan to Gemini, etc. The meaning of the zodiac signs correlate to the Hebrew month, for example, Libra is depicted as scales which represent the Day of Judgment, the weighing of our deeds during the New Year. Virgo is the arm of a virgin holding five flowers. She symbolizes Elul, the Hebrew month of "introspection and repentance preceding the Day of Judgment [when] symbolically, we wish to be considered pure as a virgin, holding forth the flowers of our Torah learning (five flowers; the five books of Moses) in our

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[114] "The Bialystoker Synagogue-Astrological Paintings." *Richard McBee website*, accessed January 2, 2011. http://www.richardmcbee.com/site/index.php.

merit."[115] The visual calendar on the ceiling of the Bialystoker synagogue provides the sense of rhythm inherent in the Jewish year, just as it was depicted years ago in the synagogues of Eastern Europe.

Built in 1887, the Eldridge Street Synagogue (Figure H) is another example of a classic Eastern European synagogue, and this site has also become an impressive historical and cultural landmark. I remember the first time I walked into the sanctuary, I was overcome by the beautiful restoration and artistry of the architectural design. Most especially, the dark blue painted ceiling with the delicate stars set amidst the columns and arches, invited me to feel as if I was looking up at the night sky. Stars are a recurrent theme throughout the interior, appearing "in the building's sixty-seven stained-glass windows and in the carved wood, pillars, brass fixtures and faux-marble painted and stenciled walls and ceilings."[116] The stained-glass windows are filled with various colors – reds, turquoise, and other jewel-tones surround the worshipper like a royal crown. These vibrant windows "helped separate the worshipper from ordinary life and elevate the soul in preparation for prayer."[117] From the crowded streets of the Lower East Side, worshippers would enter and find sanctuary from their lives as hard working immigrants.

There exist no blueprints, journals, letters or other documentation that can illuminate the exact intentions of the original artisans. Despite this, we can trace clear inspirations from which they drew. Most pronounced is the synagogue's neo-Moorish design, which we can see in the intricate floral motifs, as well as the gold stars painted on a dark blue ceiling, suggesting the celestial heavens. This style, "which many associate

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[115] Ibid.
[116] Bonnie Rosenstock, "Starry Window to be Museum's Crowning Glory." *The Villager* (Vol.29 Number 43) March 31-April 6, 2010.
[117] Museum at Eldridge Street (placard).

with the Sephardic tradition, was very popular with synagogues built at this time. The Moorish style evoked a high point of Jewish life, when the Jews, Christians and Muslims lived peaceably together in Spain (11th century), and Jewish intellectual and spiritual life flourished."[118]

Early examples of synagogues that integrated Moorish design into their architecture include two communities in Berlin – The Leipzig Synagogue of 1855 and the New Synagogue of 1866. Synagogue architects and designers wanted to assert a unique, Jewish identity and at the same time, draw from popular styles in the greater community. As such, in late-Victorian society neo-Moorish style was very popular. It held a romantic and exotic flare. Western and Eastern European Jewish communities wanted to claim their place in the surrounding "Orientalist" cultural fervor and as Jews immigrated to America, they continued to do so. Eldridge Street drew its inspiration from Central Synagogue and Temple Emanu-El of New York City, two of its uptown neighbors that also incorporated Moorish design into their sacred spaces.[119] As Jonathan Sarna observes, "Just as generations of Lutherans and Catholics looked to their predecessors in America for guidance, so East European Jews looked to Reform Jews: sometimes they quietly emulated them, sometimes they explicitly rejected them, but never could they totally ignore them."[120]

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[118] *Beyond the Façade Architectural Tour of the Eldridge Street Synagogue* (Museum at Eldridge Street, 2011).
[119] *Beyond the Façade Architectural Tour of the Eldridge Street Synagogue* (Museum at Eldridge Street, 2011).
[120] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 178.

A large east facing stained-glass window was installed in October 2010 as a kind of "crowning glory"[121] to a twenty-four year restoration process. The window, designed by artist Kiki Smith and architect Deborah Gans, is an extension of the building's star motif. According to Gans:

> Sitting in the sanctuary dazzled by all the layers of color and ornament, Kiki and I knew that the one thing the synagogue did not need was yet another motif. We wanted rather to elaborate on what was there, in a way that was perhaps new but would also encourage one to reflect. The motif that unifies the sanctuary is the star. So we thought to extend this veil of stars into the literal opening for the sky and to have them play with actual light. There is a literal veil or curtain painted in the illusionistic apse next to the ark, which to me suggests the hidden presence of God who in Judaism cannot be looked upon directly. The stars themselves are also a kind of veil – the veil of heaven that intercedes between us and Divine light.[122]

Once again, the star motif represents the congregation's spiritual aspirations and theological ideas of God. What differs from the Bialystoker is that the Eldridge Street Synagogue is not just a historical recollection of the past, but a major 21st century artistic project in its own right. Surrounded by an original interior, the east window is in keeping with the innovative spirit of the Eldridge Street founders (the neo-Moorish style was vogue in the mid-19th century) and, at the same time, a beautiful artistic rending of the Eldridge Street Synagogue today. With respect for the past and a look to the future, Smith and Gans effectively integrated the old and new in a careful balance between preservation and re-interpretation.

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[121] Bonnie Rosenstock, "Starry Window to be Museum's Crowning Glory." *The Villager* (Vol.29 Number 43) March 31-April 6, 2010.
[122] *Beyond the Façade Architectural Tour of the Eldridge Street Synagogue* (Museum at Eldridge Street, 2011).

Re-Interpreting

As expressed so artfully in the integration of the new and old in the Eldridge Street synagogue, stars, in general, still serve as a symbolic motif in the decoration of synagogue space. However, the motif of the zodiac that we find in the Bialystoker synagogue hardly emerges within the mainstream of liberal Judaism today. There is little or no talk of re-engaging zodiac signs into the design and decoration of synagogue space. We are not about to resurrect the superstitious beliefs or messianic longings that emerged in an earlier time and place. And yet, the decision to denigrate zodiac symbolism to rank superstition may be premature. The motif remained relevant for many reasons, only one of which was pre-modern superstition.

To begin with, as much as we might consider astrology utterly superstitious, even modern people still identify with their zodiac sign. There have been times when I have referred to myself as "such a Gemini" when I am of two minds on an issue, and I do not believe I am altogether unique. My own case is purely superficial, but millions of American still consult their horoscope daily, as more than a symbolic gesture. With this cultural ambivalence to the zodiac in mind we can appreciate a recent stir that occurred surrounding zodiac signs on January 13, 2011. On that date, the world turned upside down when news channels announced our zodiac signs might have changed. It began when a reporter from Minnesota's Star Tribune claimed that the slow movement of the Earth on its axis changes the planet's alignment with the constellations, actually bringing about a new zodiac sign named Ophiuchus. A reader "tweeted" the following: "First we

were told that Pluto is not a planet, now there's a new zodiac sign, Ophiuchus...my childhood was a bloody lie."[123]

In the end, this was all a big cosmic misunderstanding. But what I found fascinating were the extended conversations on Facebook among my rabbinical school colleagues:

> Student 1: I am not an Aquarius – once a Pisces always a Pisces!
>
> Student 2: Avodah Zarah!
>
> Student 3: Isn't investing significance in the Zodiac idolatry, according to the Talmud?
>
> Student 4 (This was not me, although I did give the comment a thumbs up): I'd like to come to Student 1's defense. The zodiac actually plays a role in rabbinic literature (read the beginning chapters of Pirke D'Rebbe Eliezer).
>
> Student 1: Oh the controversy.

Here we have more evidence (if we need any) that the zodiac still figures into our conversations about who we are. Now on the virtual pages of Facebook, the debate continues as to astrology's role within the rabbinic tradition. But I think we need to raise the level of the conversation. The zodiac comprises astrological signs that people may look to for guidance, but within religious architecture, the zodiac is a *symbol*:

> The word symbol is sometime misunderstood and used interchangeably with the word sign. Unlike signs, which convey clear messages, symbols are more messy or ambiguous. While a sign usually has nothing more to say than the message it delivers, symbols are multivalent and have plenty to say. A sign points to itself whereas a symbol points to something beyond itself....In order for a symbol to work the group using it also has to agree on what it stands for or points to...Likewise, if a congregation does not agree on what ideology or theology their house of prayer should mirror in the public eye, then the building will not work as a symbolic

[123] Jesse McKinley, "Did Your Horoscope Predict This?" *New York Times*, January 14, 2011.

> expression of that community no matter what architectural typology it used.[124]

Throughout my months of delving into the meaning of the zodiac for Jewish communities of the past, I have been intrigued by it not as a pseudo-scientific explanation of causality but as a symbolic motif. How can it help us be more expansive in our use of cosmological symbolism within our synagogue space?

Now that we know more about the meaning behind star symbolism and the zodiac in particular, let us reconsider its ability to inspire those who still gather in our sanctuaries. We should understand it as symbolic of God's grandeur as Creator and of our moral responsibility to care for the delicate balance of nature.

The zodiac is a reflection of the heavenly majesty of the night sky, a timeless marker of God's handiwork and awesome creative power. The idea that the universe operates with laws and patterns, "that everything in existence seems amenable to mathematical formulation is of startling spiritual significance...it is this cosmic grandeur, so carefully orchestrated everywhere we look, that our prayer book reinforces at every turn."[125] This order is not only scientifically monumental, but religiously so. If our prayer books continue to emphasize this cosmic grandeur, why shouldn't our artistic design do so as well? When a community gathers together in a sacred place, its members have the opportunity to recognize the great expansiveness of God. Artistic imagery, whether represented in classic motifs or abstraction, can serve as one way to summon the most elemental manifestations and mysteries of our Creator.

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[124] Richard Vosko, "The Search for Symbolism in Religious Architecture," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects, Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture* (Fall 2009) http://www.aia.org/practicing/groups/kc/AIAB081076.
[125] Lawrence Hoffman, *The Way Into Jewish Prayer.* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000) 126.

I believe God is a unifying force within the universe, revealed everywhere while mysteriously beyond all that we can experience. Theologian and scholar of mysticism, Art Green, most eloquently articulates this idea in his book *Radical Judaism*:

> My theological position is that of a mystical panentheist, one who believes that God is present throughout all existence, that Being of YHWH underlies and unifies all that is. At the same time (and this is panentheism as distinct from pantheism), the whole is mysteriously and infinitely greater than the sum of its parts, and cannot be fully known or reduced to its constituent beings.[126]

Drawing on Kabbalistic and Hasidic language, as well as his own life experience, Green brings to his readers a neo-mystical perspective on God. Green explores the power of opening our eyes to God, a practice that requires seeing with both mind and heart: "Our task is to notice, to pay attention to, the incredible wonder of it all, and to find and praise God in that moment of paying attention."[127] In the past, the zodiac motif functioned as a kind of artistic liturgy, representing the dome of heaven, the rhythm of sacred time, the Temple, and more. And in all the manifestations of meaning and symbolic resonance the zodiac held through time, we return again and again to the idea of God as Creator.

Before Jews had the language of modern science, astrology was key to making sense of the universe. Green demonstrates that even with advanced technology and mathematical formulations, we can find ways to notice the grandeur of creation.

Though not primarily known as a social activist, Green couples his theological assertions with a sense of implicit moral responsibility: "Yes," he insists, "this does have much to do with the ecological agenda and the key role that religion needs to play in changing our attitudes toward the environment and resources amid which we humans

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[126] Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism-Rethinking God and Tradition.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 18.
[127] Ibid., 22.

live."[128] In another section Green writes, "We have emerged as partners of the One in the survival and maintenance of this planet and all the precious attainments that have evolved here."[129] As partners, does this mean that God takes notice of us and cares for us as well? God can be revealed as an undercurrent of energy among all matter, but can God *feel* anything toward us? Green speaks to this when he writes,

> I am proclaiming my love and devotion to Being, my readiness to live a life of seeking and responding to its truth. But implied here also is a faith that in some mysterious way Being loves me, that it rejoices for a fleeting instant in dwelling within me, delighting in this unique form that constitutes my existence, as it delights in each of its endlessly diverse manifestations.[130]

Bringing the heavens down to earth, as the symbol of the zodiac seeks to do, is about opening our soul to the manifestations of God in all existence and in all seasons. As a result of this recognition, we ought to feel a sense of responsibility to pursue sacred deeds in partnership with the Divine. I believe one aim of the zodiac symbol is to awaken us to something greater than ourselves, and then inspire us to respond with moral responsibility.

So if we are not rendering the literal zodiac motif in our synagogue design, what is another way to artistically represent God as Creator? How do we bring the heavens down to earth for a while in our synagogue sanctuaries? How can we represent our moral responsibility to protect the environment in our design?

Let us think broadly about the ways we can visually tap into the souls of congregants. As my imagined synagogue (described in the Introduction) indicated, my aesthetic taste is more minimal. I like clean, modern, light-filled, natural spaces. One

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[128] Ibid., 16.
[129] Ibid., 27.
[130] Ibid., 20.

addition aspect of my envisioned synagogue I did not yet describe is the use of visual images within the sanctuary space during prayer. Sophisticated technology enables us to do this in several ways, but I never realized the power of this approach until recently.

My husband and I attended a New York Philharmonic Concert at Lincoln Center. We decided to go because the Philharmonic was scheduled to play Mozart's Symphony No. 40. The second piece was Mahler's "Kindertotenlieder" and the third one I didn't even pay attention to when we first bought the tickets. Little did I know that the evening would end and I would be riveted to my seat with tears in my eyes. Pianist and composer Thomas Ades and his partner Tal Rosner (a video artist from Israel) jointly created "In Seven Days." Ades would write ten minutes of music, and then Rosner would fashion video images, or vice versa. Back and forth they worked, until what emerged are seven connected sections rendering Genesis 1 in music and art. It was riveting, challenging, "restless and kaleidoscopically colorful." It was a modern midrash. For thirty minutes, I was completely immersed in the intricacies of the Genesis story. And because I have been so fascinated by star symbolism, I was particularly captured with the visual imagery of the sun, moon and stars. It was then that I began to imagine what it would mean to use video artistry within a synagogue space. Truth be told, Avery Fisher Hall became a kind of sanctuary that winter evening.

I am not suggesting that we simply download star symbols from the internet and project them on our synagogue walls just because we have the ability to do so. What Ades and Rosner created was at a high level of artistic excellence. Certainly challenges and drawbacks to this approach exist, as Eileen Crowley states in her book Liturgical Art for a Media Culture: "Critics claim that the introduction of media [to] worship results in a

decrease in worshipers' active participation and a consequent increase in worshiper' passive spectatorship."[131] And yet, what one critic calls spectatorship, may be, in fact, a deeper level of contemplation and engagement for another. The conversation is really about what it means to participate meaningfully in worship – instituting media arts into worship can be a method by which congregants become more engaged and responsive. But, of course, the degree to which this happens depends on the culture of a particular community and how committed its members are to traditional forms of expression.

With the challenges in mind, we should bring visual imagery into our sacred space as this field develops, for, as Richard Vosko writes, "the use of liturgical media arts is no longer an experiment but a reality with endless potential."[132] Why not welcome each Hebrew month during the recitation of Rosh Chodesh prayers with melodies and media arts? Why not represent the seven days of creation or the parting of the Red Sea with visual artistry? What we are talking about here are symbolic acts that point to the creative potential within each of us. As each of us are in a process of spiritual and creative evolution, so too, our sacred spaces should not be static, but instead, "alive and waiting to be something."[133]

In the vein of creative change, how can we create sacred places that look to the future with a sense of moral responsibility? Specifically in terms of the environment, we ought to be vigilant in our careful use of energy and natural resources. Vosko writes,

> We are learning, for younger generations especially, that the so-called conventional symbols...(steeples, stained glass, etc) and often used to identify religious building are no longer as important as other factors.

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[131] Eileen D. Crowley, *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture* (Liturgical Press, 2007) 37.
[132] Richard Vosko, review on back cover of *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture.*
[133] Anthony Tommasini, "A Soundtrack for the Chaos, Light and Dark of Creation." *New York Times*, January 7, 2011.

> What apparently matters more to people of faith is their mission and how well they are treated inside the building. The new symbolic expressions, therefore, appear to include a spirit of hospitality, lively music, inspiring sermons, well-trained ministries, effective social outreach programs and energy conservation. These symbolic actions point to a truth beyond themselves at the same time they "effect" what they signify...We are already witnessing the construction of non-traditional shapes that eschew typical religious symbolism and instead emphasize the importance of sustainable architecture, energy conservation, barrier-free design and a response to the needs of the congregation.[134]

As Vosko observes, symbolic actions are now of greater value than conventional symbols. In addition to bringing new forms of artistic expression, such as visual imagery, into sacred space, we can also create synagogues that adhere to the value of sustainability and environmental stewardship. Sustainability is in keeping with the spirit of star symbolism. We are made more aware of the awesomeness of God's creation and, in turn, we respond with a commitment to its preservation. In closing, the text of Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13 speaks most powerfully to our commitment to sustaining our world: "See my works, how fine and excellent they are! All that I created, I created for you. Reflect on this, and do not corrupt or desolate my world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you." Although these words are ancient, the task before us to translate symbolic actions into tangible changes within our sacred space is ever-present.

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[134] Richard Vosko, "The Search for Symbolism in Religious Architecture," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects, Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture* (Fall 2009) http://www.aia.org/practicing/groups/kc/AIAB081076.

Conclusion: Under the Canopy of Heaven

In the most elemental sense, sacred places are where we reconnect to who we are and what we value most. Additionally, to create holy places that serve community, we require the use of symbols. Catholic theologian Bernard Cooke writes:

> By the use of symbol (words, gestures, artistic creations, etc.) we make ourselves present to one another, we share ourselves and our histories and our inmost feelings; we form human community...we can be for one another very superficially if we communicate very little of what is truly meaningful...or we can live in open and creative intimacy and express to others (and to ourselves) who and what we truly are.[135]

Although Cooke refers to his own Catholic tradition, his words speak universally to all religions and cultures. Symbols are powerful, but not inherently so. To be effective, symbols must be lived with creative expression. They must have resonance, and they must point to ideas and values beyond themselves. In other words, symbols are instrumental in the formation of sacred community – the task before conventional Jewish congregations is to re-engage the symbols of our past with meaning that speaks to us in the present.

This paper illustrates the meaning of star symbolism, particularly the zodiac signs, within synagogues over time and place. One need not look far to recognize that as in ancient times, people today discover the sacred under the canopy of stars. Take, for instance, the following account by Sgt. Nate Geist, an American soldier fighting in Afghanistan:

> That night, I laid down my sleeping bag on the rocks right near our commander, knowing that if we were attacked, I would dedicate myself to protecting his life. I settled into my sleeping bag with my rifle and looked up at the stars above. I acknowledged that, today, I had been up and down

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[135] Bernard J. Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006) 55.

> some of the most dangerous (and bumpy) roads in Afghanistan, I didn't have any shelter above me, I was very vulnerable to an attack, and here I was, lying on the ground on top of some large rocks as my bed. And at that moment, I finally acknowledged how miserable I felt. No, not miserable for myself, but for you. I felt miserable for everyone who wasn't going to fall asleep like I was, able to spend my entire night watching God's craftsmanship above...[136]

In testifying to the potency of stars as a symbol Sgt. Geist recalls for us the vulnerability and subsequent assertion of faith demonstrated by our patriarch Abraham under the desert night sky. No less than Abraham, and no less than the rest of us also, the symbolism of stars support the universal human search to know our purpose, reach towards our fullest potential, and stand in the face of the unknown.

As we have seen, there are numerous interpretations as to why Genesis 15 depicts God directing Abraham to look up at the heavens in the face of doubt. What might Abraham have experienced that led him to regain his faith? Did he ascend to the heavens on a mystical journey? How did astrological calculations figure into his quest? Whatever the answer, Genesis 15 is paradigmatic in its use of stars to provide a backdrop upon which theological ideas and mystical understandings are projected through time.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, stars occur metaphorically but not as "science." By contrast, in rabbinic and early medieval mystical texts – and in the art from ancient synagogues – the "scientific" role of stars was debated. Some Rabbinic authorities held strong objections to astrology, while others integrated it into their efforts to uncover the mysteries of the cosmos. Without a doubt, astrology was a familiar "trope" in the ancient world and the zodiac signs held symbolic resonance in Jewish life.

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[136] *New York Times online*, "In Their Own Words: Soldiers and Their Families on the Afghanistan War," Sgt. Nate Danger Geist, HHC 2-130 Infantry Battalion http://documents.nytimes.com/soldiers-and-military-families-writing-on-afghanistan-war#document/p4.

The "science" of astrology continued into the medieval period, particularly among the widely influential German Pietists. Their puritanical attitude toward aesthetics prohibited anything beyond the most minimal decoration within prayerbooks and upon synagogue walls. But the motif of the zodiac re-emerged with the rise of Lurianic Kabbalah and messianic expectations during the early modern period. Then, with the onset of the Enlightenment, we find a split between Eastern European synagogues and Western European ones – in the east, the zodiac motif remained a celebrated marker of identity and messianic hope; while Reformers in Western Europe deemed it superstitious and pre-modern.

From Europe we traveled to two historic Eastern European synagogues of the Lower East Side, both of which integrate star symbolism into their interiors. The Bialystoker synagogue retains the traditional motif of the zodiac, a remnant of what we imagine the synagogues may have looked in Europe. The Eldridge Street synagogue restored its neo-Moorish sanctuary and then installed a new east window inspired by the motif of stars.

For centuries, stars in general, and the zodiac in particular, have served as a symbolic motif in the decoration of synagogue space. This motif persisted for so long because humans never cease to wonder about the majesty of creation. The zodiac has stood for more than astrological calculations – it has symbolized the canopy of heaven, the cycle of sacred time, the longing to bring heaven down to earth. Precisely because of the many reasons that the zodiac motif has persisted, we should take star symbolism seriously in the creation of our sacred places. Conventional congregations need to recognize the power of sharing moments together under the night sky. We then can

integrate these moments into the time spent together back in our synagogue sanctuaries. When we infuse spirit and artful expression into space, we create a meeting place of the soul. The goal is to enliven our synagogues with the sense of holiness that we discover in spaces like mountains and stars; to connect us to memories of time's past; and to inspire hope for the future. Our synagogues should be portals, physical and spiritual, which open us to something greater than ourselves, and inspire us to recognize the grandeur of our world and cosmos.

As artist Tobi Kahn writes, in reference to art created for a particular synagogue sanctuary, "Paintings created for this sacred space are an invitation—to discover the grandeur of the world we were given, to contemplate the beginning, its first shapes and forms...the continual flowering of life, radiance and darkening, elemental particles of being, earthbound and celestial vantage points."[137] The design of synagogue space is an opportunity to represent what we aspire to know, be and create, in relation to God. It is an integration of the past, present and future. For ultimately, while we feel there is something inherently sacred about the grandeur of the night sky, the sanctity of a synagogue through its artistic creations is "virtually sacred" and they "cry out for dedication ceremonies to invite God in."[138] And so, from Abraham under the night sky, to the Jews gathered amidst Byzantine-era mosaics, to the wooden synagogues alongside the Dneiper River, to the new immigrants of the Lower East Side, and now us...we imagine the artistic representations yet to be created that invite God in; we journey forward, ever reaching upward.

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[137] Ena Giurescu Heller, ed. *Tobi Kahn: Sacred Spaces for the 21st Century.* (London: D Giles Limited, 2009) 12.
[138] Lawrence Hoffman, "Sacred Places and the Pilgrimage of Life." Meeting House Essays series (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991) 13.

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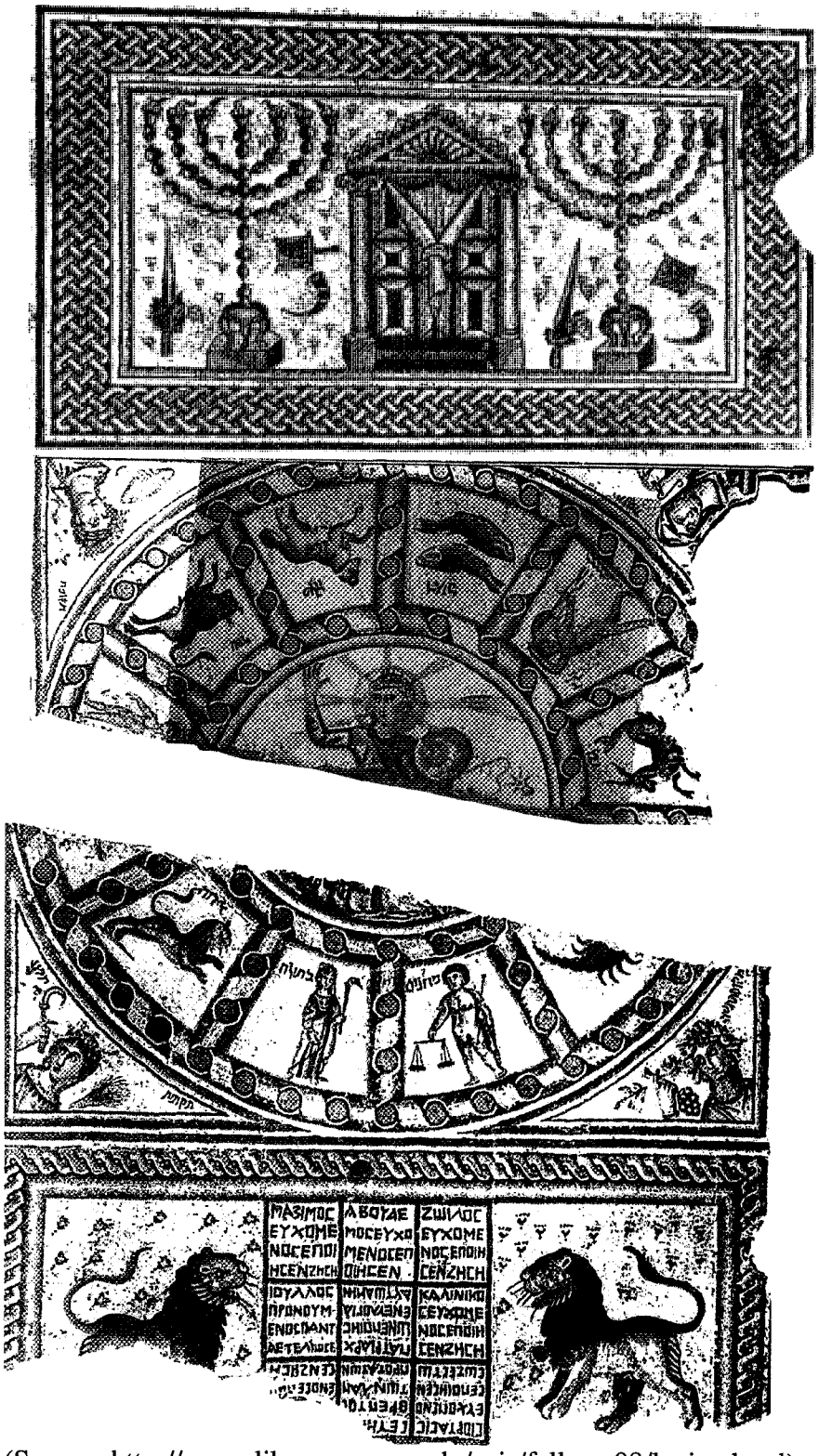
Genesis 15:2
Genesis 15:5
Numbers 24:17
Ezekiel 1:15-21
Bereshit Rabbah, Lech Lecha, Chapter 44:12
Bereshit Rabbah, Lech Lecha, Chapter 44:10
BT *Shabbat* 156a/b
BT *Yoma* 54a (Tosafot)
Pesiqta Rabbati, Piska 20

Appendix I

Figure A: Hammath Tiberias



(Source: http://www.library.upenn.edu/cajs/fellows08/levine.html)

Figure B: Ein Gedi

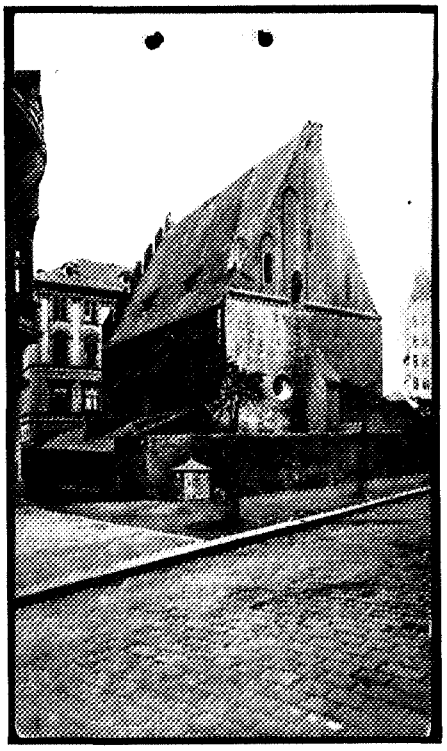
(Source: http://www.peshitta.org/images/Ein_Gedi_Synagogue.bmp)

(Beginning at the top of the image)
Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared,
Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noach, Shem, Ham and Japheth.
Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo
Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, and Aquarius, Pisces.
Nisan, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Av, Elul
Tishrei, Marheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat
and Adar Abraham Isaac Jacob. Peace...

Figure C: Beth Alpha

(Source: http://0.tqn.com/d/astrology/1/0/V/4/-/-/BeitAlphaLg.jpg)

Figure D: The Altneuschul (Old-New Synagogue) of Prague



(Source: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org:80/article.aspx/Prague)

Figure E: Interior of a Medieval Synagogue (woodcut)

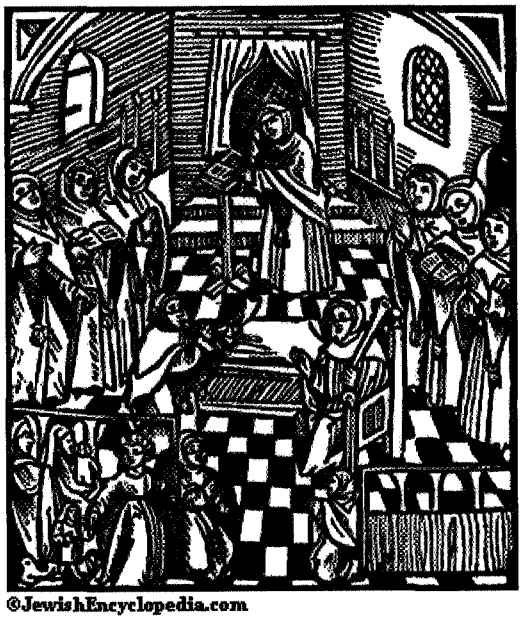
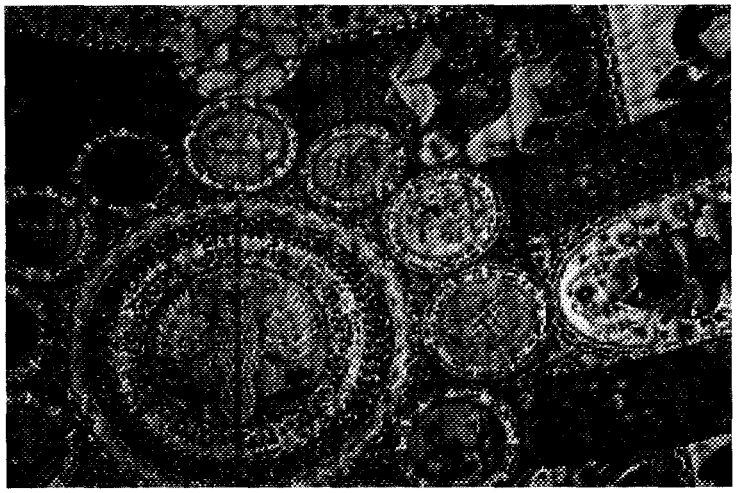
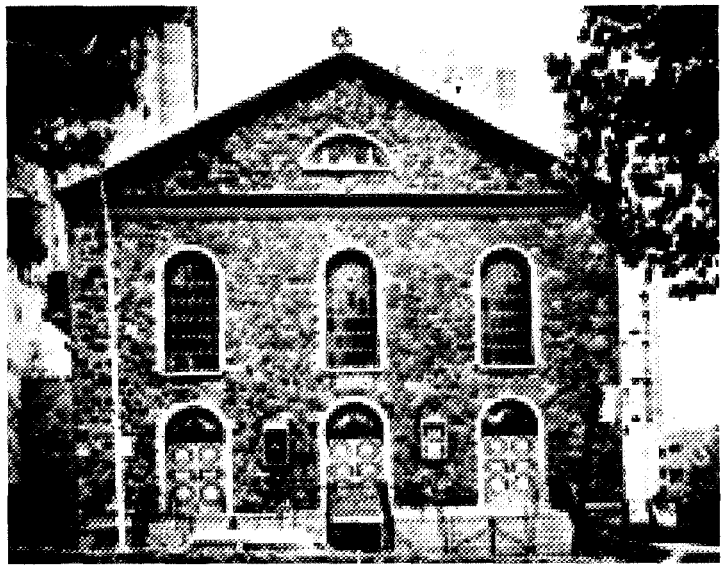


Figure F: Ceiling Design of a Modern Eastern European Synagogue
(Chodorow Synagogue, Ukraine, built in 1652)



(Source: http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/16/chodorow.asp)

Figure G: The Bialystoker Synagogue (Lower East Side, Manhattan)



(Source: http://www.richardmcbee.com, The Bialystoker Synagogue-Astrological Paintings)

(Source: http://www.richardmcbee.com, The Bialystoker Synagogue-Astrological Paintings)

(Source: http://www.richardmcbee.com, The Bialystoker Synagogue-Astrological Paintings)

Figure H: Eldridge Street Synagogue (Lower East Side, Manhattan)

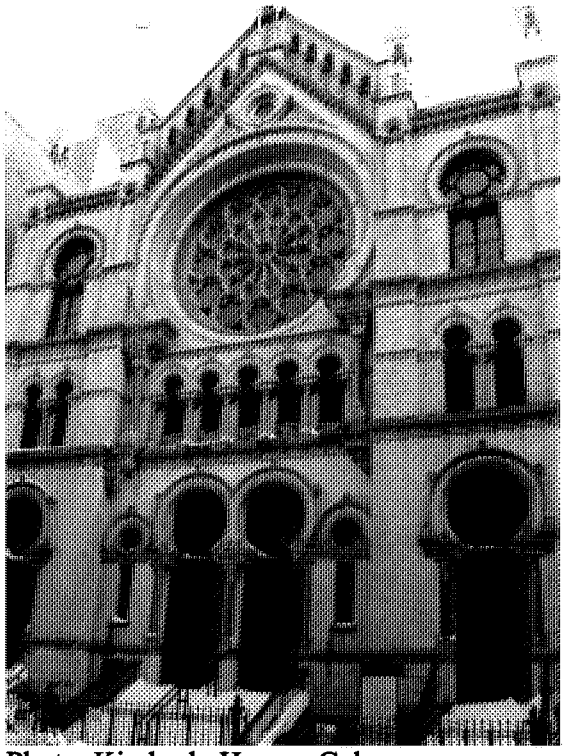


Photo: Kimberly Herzog Cohen

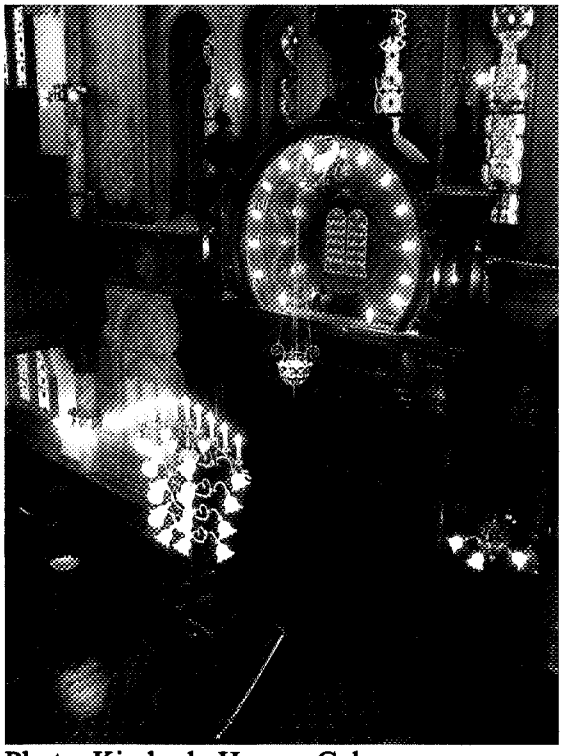


Photo: Kimberly Herzog Cohen

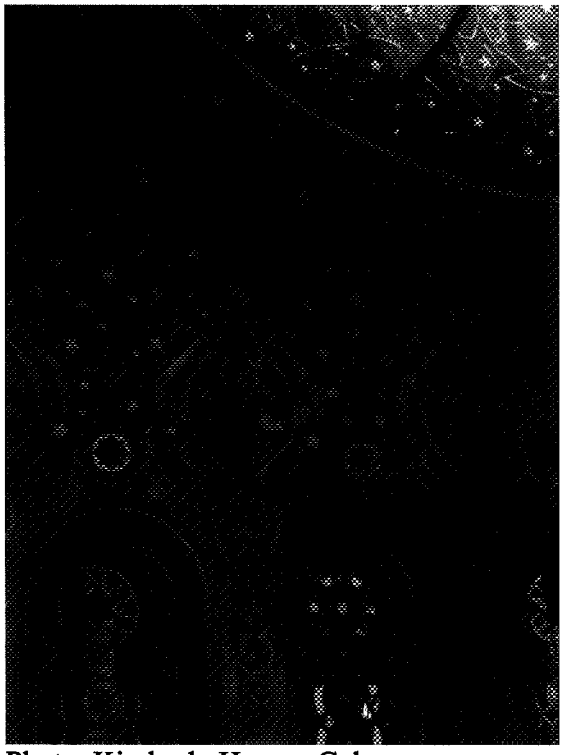


Photo: Kimberly Herzog Cohen

Photo: Kimberly Herzog Cohen


Photo: Kimberly Herzog Cohen

Temple Emanuel Elul Reflections, 2 Elul 5770
Under the Desert Stars
By Lauren Brucker

When I walked off the bus into the desert I was stunned. My Birthright trip on URJ Kesher was three days in and every day was packed with information and activities. However, this evening was particularly special. I felt as if we had landed in an undiscovered world. The sandy mountains encircled our camping site and the dirty wind danced across my face. I didn't mind--I was at peace. The desolate desert was purely wonderful…

…One particular moment was surprisingly spiritual for me. Our Birthright leader gathered our group of 40 together. She had us lie down on wicker mats and silently just...be. The panoramic view was inspiring. I looked up and a school of crystal stars were staring right back at me. Our group of usually rambunctious twenty-somethings was as silent as a winter morning. We became part of the atmosphere and my mind slowly floated in to the ocean-like ceiling above my head. Soft instrumental music tiptoed into the experience and I was overcome with emotion. I closed my eyes and prayed "*Eli Eli, Shelo yigamer le'olam.* My God, My God, I pray that these things never end."

I prayed so deeply that I could continue to enjoy all of the good fortune I've been so lucky to have. I thought about my future: being back home in LA, going to law school, and becoming an adult. I thought about my life: being blessed with the most caring

family, being completely in love, and having unconditionally loyal friends. I thought and thought. Then, a single tear dropped down my cheek and my lips curled into a contented smile. I have never felt so at peace with my individual self, my body, and my mind. It was magical and even rhetoric can't do my inner emotion justice.

That moment, that night, was a dream. And one thing I'll never let go, as long as I live, is those stars. Like Van Gogh's starry night it was a piece of artwork that will not be forgotten.