



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 16: Virtual Tour of a Synagogue

While Jews are a “people of the book,” we also connect with our faith tradition with ritual objects. While the symbols and objects you may encounter when you visit a synagogue may vary depending on that particular synagogue’s perspective on ritual observance, you will find the objects described here in just about every synagogue.

These objects can be adorned in beautiful, ornate ways. These decorative elements reflect the idea of what is known in Jewish tradition as *hiddur mitzvah*-the effort to not only observe God’s commandments, but to also beautify these commandments.

We begin our virtual synagogue tour with the *Sefer Torah-The Torah Scroll*. This is the central symbol in a synagogue. Most synagogues will have more than one Torah Scroll, often simply called the Torah. The Torah, also referred to as the Written Torah, contains the Five Books of Moses. While the size of a specific Torah Scroll may vary, the words within any Torah Scroll are identical. This comes from God’s admonition in Deuteronomy Chapter 4, verse 2, not to add or subtract from anything I command you.¹

The Torah scroll has various accouterments and decorative symbols that accompany it. Let’s explore each one as we continue our virtual tour.

Atzei Chayim: The two wooden shafts with handles that extend beyond the scroll itself and by which the Torah can be held and by which it can be scrolled to different sections of the Torah. *Atzei Chayim* refer to the pair of handles, but a single handle is known as an *eitz chayim*, which translates literally as “Tree of Life.” One prominent reference to the Torah is to refer to it as a Tree of Life.

¹ While this has always been true for the Written Torah-the Torah Scroll, there is also a tradition referred to as Oral Torah which references all subsequent sacred Jewish text and allows for a more dynamic view of what God expects from us. To learn more, please refer to “The Written Torah and the Oral Torah,” another episode in the “Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic” series.

Torah Mantel/Covering: As a recognition of how valuable the Torah is to the Jewish people, we cloak the Torah in a covering. Often made of velvet and typically embroidered with beautiful threading, the mantel both protects and beautifies the Torah.

Keter/Crown: The Torah Scroll is often adorned with a silver crown which rests atop the *atzei chayim*. An alternative to a crown is to have a set of two decorative ornaments, known in Hebrew as *rimonim*--finials, literally, “pomegranates”--atop the two Torah handles.

Yad/Pointer: For those who are reading or chanting from the Torah Scroll, rather than following the words with one’s finger, a pointer known as a *yad* (the Hebrew word for “hand”) is used. It is often made of silver and shaped at the end like a very small hand with a pointed finger.

Aron Kodesh-the Holy Ark: In a synagogue, the Torah Scrolls are kept in the *aron kodesh*-the Holy Ark, also known simply as the Ark. It is most often made of wood and is also highly decorative. The Ark is constructed in a way so that the Torah Scrolls are stored upright, and it is often closed with a curtain known in Hebrew as a *parochet*.

It is customary for the Ark to be opened and for the congregation to stand when the Torah is being removed from or put back into the Ark, processed around the synagogue, or during certain special prayers. In synagogues that are located west of Jerusalem, the Ark is placed at the east end of the synagogue so that when worshipers face the Ark, they are facing toward the holy city of Jerusalem. This is also where one will likely find the *Bimah*, the raised podium or platform from which the worship service is led. In some synagogues, the *bimah* is located in the middle of the sanctuary.

Ner Tamid-the Eternal Light: Hanging above the Holy Ark is the *ner tamid*--the Eternal Light. Today the light is not a flame but typically a light bulb which is kept on at all times. It is symbolic of the golden *menorah* – the seven-armed candelabra which was lit continually in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.²

Siddur/Prayer Book: For worship in the synagogue, a *siddur* or prayer book will be available to follow along and participate in the service. There are *siddurim*—plural for prayer books--that are specific to weekday worship, with other prayer books that are for the Jewish Sabbath and festivals. Other prayer books will contain services for both weekdays, and the Sabbath and holidays. Many major denominations of Judaism create their own *siddurim*, which aligns with the particular theology of their movement.

Prayer books vary from synagogue to synagogue, with differing amounts of Hebrew versus English in the prayer book, or the number of prayers contained in the prayer book. The essential prayers are found in virtually all prayer books devoted to Jewish prayer.

Chumash/Five Books of Moses: In reading through the Torah Scroll there are assigned portions for each week of the year, and special portions for Jewish festivals. For congregants to follow along as the assigned Torah portion is being read, a book known in Hebrew as a *chumash* (from

² This should not be confused with the special nine-branch *menorah* lit on the festival of Hanukkah.

the Hebrew word “five”) is distributed. In addition to the Five Books of Moses divided into the weekly and special portions, there are commentaries on the various Torah portions, and excerpts from the Prophets that are assigned for each week and the festivals. These prophetic excerpts are referred to as the *haftarah*, or additional reading.

Yarmulkah/Kippah/Skullcap: The *yarmulkah* (in Yiddish) or *kippah* (in Hebrew) is the traditional head covering worn by Jews as a sign of God’s presence over us. This is traditionally worn by men, but today in more progressive Jewish communities, *kippot* (plural) are worn by women as well and gender non-conforming individuals.

Tallit/Prayer Shawl with Tzitzit/Fringes: The *tallit*/prayer shawl is typically worn in the synagogue for morning worship. Fringes are attached to each of the four corners of the *tallit* and knotted in a complex procedure with religious and numerical significance--most prominently considered to be a reminder of the 613 commandments based on the written Torah. The commandment to wear *tzitzit* can be found in the Book of Numbers Chapter 15, verses 38-40.

Like the *kippah*, what was once seen as male ritual garb is now open to others as well in more egalitarian Jewish communities. In Reform synagogues, the commandment to wear a *tallit* is often viewed as optional so one might see many of the congregants not wearing a prayer shawl.

Tefillin/Phylacteries: This symbol is worn during morning prayers on weekdays, but not on Shabbat or Jewish holidays. Visit a traditional synagogue during the week and you will see worshippers--mostly men, but more and more women and gender non-conforming individuals as well in egalitarian settings--wearing *tefillin*. Related to the Hebrew word *tefillah* which means prayer are a set of two cases with leather straps attached. One case is bound to the arm at the bicep with straps wrapping down the arm onto the hand. The other case is placed on the head with two straps hanging down from the case.

Contained within each case are very small, hand-written scrolls containing Torah references to the precept of *tefillin*. We derive the commandment to wear *tefillin* from Deuteronomy Chapter 6, verse 8, to bind the commandment as a sign upon our hand, and to be a symbol between our eyes. As with the other symbols of the synagogue and Jewish prayer, this precept is designed to bring us closer to God and imbue our daily lives with holiness.

As a religion that revolves around practice more than belief, Jewish ritual objects play a major role in communal Jewish life and symbolize many of Judaism’s core values.

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