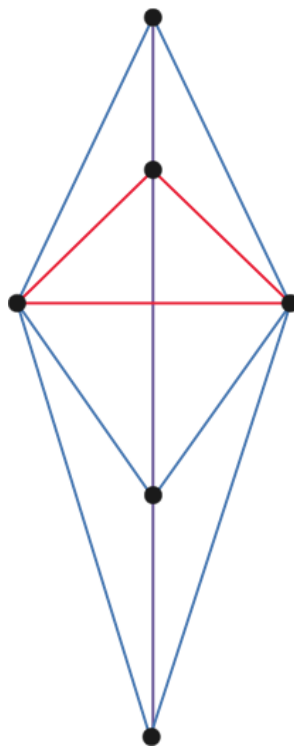


# BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

*Re-envisioning Synagogue Space*



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Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for Rabbinic Ordination  
Academy For Jewish Religion, Riverdale, New York, November 2010

*Where Does the Temple Begin,  
Where Does It End?*

There are things you can't reach. But  
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,  
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing  
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night. I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around  
as though with your arms open.

And thinking: maybe something will come, some  
shining coil of wind,  
or a few leaves from any old tree—  
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.  
Everything in the world  
comes.

At least, closer.

And, cordially.

Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.  
Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold  
fluttering around the corner of the sky

of God, the blue air.

*-Mary Oliver*

# Dedicated To Rabbi Everett Gendler Shlitah

With Special Thanks to my beloved Zushe for his unwavering support and excellent editing and to Rose Tannenbaum for her computer graphic designs.

## Table of Contents

### Part One

Identifying Goals for Jewish Sacred Space.....	4
Modern Synagogue Design.....	8
Sacred Contracts.....	11
Introduction to the Language of Space.....	14
Understanding Space.....	17
Understanding Place.....	20

### Part Two

An Abbreviated History of the Development of Synagogue Spaces.....	26
The Wooden Synagogues of Poland.....	37
Modern Synagogues.....	41

### Part Three: The Mishkan as Template for Sacred Space

Connecting With The Deep Self.....	45
Connecting To Others.....	52
Connecting With The Earth.....	57
The Elements.....	61
Contemporary Applications For Elemental Design.....	70
Fire.....	71
Water.....	73
Earth.....	77
Air.....	79
Materials.....	82
Connecting With God.....	83
Appendix.....	89
A Model of Sacred Space and Time.....	90
Bibliography.....	91

## Part One

### **Identifying Goals for Jewish Sacred Space**

Larry Hoffman's book, *Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life*, delivers the results from a decade-long study called Synagogue 2000, now aptly renamed Synagogue 3000. In it, Hoffman challenges synagogues to evolve from an ethnic-oriented, market-driven corporate model, to a spiritually oriented model of sacred community, with God at the center. The underlying impulse for this study is the recognition that participation in synagogue life is rapidly dwindling as older generations are dying and younger generations are choosing not to engage or join. Hoffman argues that this downward trend in membership, attendance and engagement is reversible. However, this will require a new vision for Jewish community, with the synagogue as the central embodiment of sacred community. He states, "Eventually our ideas crystallized into the ideals of Synagogue as Sacred Community, by which we meant that relationships, agenda, activities, debate - everything – would be swept along by the recognition of God's reality. Like the desert sanctuary of Exodus, the *mishkan*, the entire purpose of synagogue life would be to fashion an institution where God quite evidently dwells." <sup>1</sup>The Synagogue 2000 project explores the trends in Jewish communal life and the decline in synagogue membership. It seeks to create a new model for reinvigorating synagogue life. This paper attempts to add to this discussion by exploring the physical changes in the architecture and design of the synagogue that would support such a model.

To better understand the trends in Jewish American spiritual life, it is necessary to recognize the sociological changes that have taken place over the past thirty years and

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<sup>1</sup> Hoffman, 31

which have lead to this “crisis”. During this period the rise of the women’s movement and the growing interest in spirituality have challenged the older *masculine* forms of worship that emphasize moralism over devotion, hierarchy over egalitarianism.<sup>2</sup> These trends reflect a broad shift in society in which the archetypal *feminine* attributes of intimacy, community, and cooperation have emerged and are challenging older *masculine* forms.<sup>3</sup> The birth of the *havurah* movement in the 1960’s, which dismissed traditional hierarchical forms in favor of a model of shared communal responsibility, coincided with the rise of the women’s movement. Both of these developments have coincided with a dramatic increase in female spiritual leadership in all sectors of Jewish life, and greater lay participation in services.

The development of independent *minyanim* over the past decade again expresses the shift away from the traditional hierarchical structure of Rabbi and Cantor as leaders of the prayer community, and which instead invests the community with responsibility for it’s own liturgical and spiritual needs. Elie Kaunfer, the founder of Kehilat Hadar, an independent *minyan*, notes that over sixty independent *minyanim* have formed over the past ten years across America and “ more then twenty thousand Jews in their twenties and early thirties have connected to these ....”<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, in an era when Eastern spiritual practices have become available to Western practitioners, scores of Jewish seekers have sought to fulfill their spiritual needs through the more intimate meditative practices of Buddhism and Yoga. Likewise, we

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<sup>2</sup> See the Forward to *Empowered Judaism* by Kaunfer, Foreward by Prof. Jonathan Sarna

<sup>3</sup> The uses of the categories of feminine and masculine are to be understood as broad archetypal constructs depicting a current sociologic trend. It should be noted that Hasidism and other mystical traditions within Judaism attempted as well, to meet the spiritual needs of individuals through the more “feminine” path of intimacy and devotion.

<sup>4</sup> Kaunfer, 4

have seen the incorporation of *Jewish* contemplative techniques into both individual practice and communal prayer.

We are witness to a flourishing of creativity in prayer life as new *siddurim* and *makhzorim* are appearing regularly. The quest for spiritual experience and sincere attempts to communicate contemporary meaning to a population of mostly Hebrew-illiterate Jewish ‘seekers’, have spawned a wide variety of inspiring creative spiritual endeavors and scores of books on Jewish spirituality.

But what has not changed in America during this period of innovation are the *majority* of our prayer *spaces*.<sup>5</sup> They remain, for the most part, reflective of the values of the past century in which hierarchy, pageantry, distance and minimal participation by laity were the norm.<sup>6</sup> As such, most modern American sanctuaries were designed with a *bima* (raised platform), akin to a stage, at the front of the prayer space. At the center of the *bima*, the ark containing the Torah scrolls is hidden behind a curtain and large doors. The Rabbi or Cantor addresses the community from a lectern upon the raised platform. The community sits audience-style, in rows facing the *bima* and often at a great distance from the *sefer Torah*. All the liturgical and ritual activity is led from this frontal, stage-like *bima*.

Often oversized, our sanctuaries were built to accommodate large numbers of Jews who no longer regularly attend synagogue. Their design often expresses grand style with soaring ceilings, magnificent gilded arks and beautiful stained glass. Although synagogue architecture attempts to express the majesty of God, the heights of Mt. Sinai, and feelings

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<sup>5</sup> I am not saying that there has been no innovation in synagogue spaces to address these concerns. Many new models have developed over the past fifteen years. But the focus of this paper is specifically on revivifying the architectural wisdom from antiquity, specifically the *mishkan*, to meet the spiritual needs of contemporary worshippers.

<sup>6</sup> This does not include Hasidic *shteiblakh*.

of awe and inspiration, they have largely failed to meet contemporary needs for meaningful, personal religious experience.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that the architecture alone is responsible for the decline in synagogue attendance, but that the design reflects an outdated model, no longer relevant or resonant for the majority of Jews who are seeking a more intimate and spiritual experience. In many cases, our grand prayer spaces speak more of our own grandiosity than of God's majesty. Monuments to our ingenuity and to the soaring heights of architectural prowess, they neither connect us with God's Creation nor with the divine nature within us. As such, our prayer spaces often reflect more human ego than divine/human relationship.

In this time of deep disconnect from the natural world, one in which we threaten our very existence and that of all life forms, we need prayer spaces that connect us with the natural world, with one another, with God. Our sanctuaries must foster an awareness of the sanctity of all life. Today, we need prayer spaces that help connect us with God and connect us with each other in sacred community. Sacred spaces should reflect our spiritual needs and goals. Their design should encourage participation, inclusion and community and allow also for intimacy and individual spiritual work.

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<sup>7</sup> The relationship between the design of the Tabernacle, modern synagogue design and Mt. Sinai will be discussed in several places further on in the paper.

## Modern Synagogue Design

Synagogue designs of the past century have frequently focused on replicating the Sinai model in a vertical form, with sweeping high ceilings that sing of majesty and of a relationship with a transcendent and distant God.<sup>8</sup> The design of the ark often echoes a Sinai theme as well. Viewed from afar, with no personal contact for the worshiper, except for the few who are honored to draw back its curtain on Torah reading days, the ark maintains a quality of mystery and inaccessibility. Modeled after Sinai, the *mishkan*<sup>9</sup> and the Temple, modern services replicate in structure and physical form the lack of access for the ordinary worshiper to God's revelation. Only Moses stood at the top of the mountain, and only Aaron and the elders stood at the foot of the mountain. Only Aaron could enter the place of the Holy Ark that contained the tablets, and only the priests could enter the section of the *mishkan* and Temple called the Holy. In all cases, a hierarchy of intimacy with God was established and in all cases the people remained outside these places of contact and connection. Our modern services and their spaces still reflect aspects of this hierarchical model. However, many modern worshipers are seeking a personal and more intimate experience of divine relationship. "Americans increasingly believe in God but not churches and synagogues – which they happily leave. Even as they claim they are following religion's inner voice. They differentiate religion from spirituality."<sup>10</sup> While many synagogues are empty on a Saturday morning, yoga studios are full. For many Americans religion has become obsolete, yet they yearn to experience

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<sup>8</sup> See *American Synagogues: A century of Architecture and Jewish Community* for a broad selection and photos and descriptions of American synagogues throughout the US.

<sup>9</sup> The terms *mishkan* and Tabernacle will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman, 128



the sacred. For “at the very highest level, human beings innately seek the sacred and each other. Just by virtue of our humanity, we ultimately are drawn to curiosity about God, connection with the sacred, a sense of life’s purpose, and a place to build a life narrative alongside others who are doing the same.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, we need sacred spaces that communicate the *horizontal* as well as the *vertical* relationship.

Mary Douglas, in her book *Leviticus as Literature*, suggests that the architecture of the *mishkan* represented a horizontal manifestation of the Sinai experience.<sup>12</sup> The Sinai model is overtly vertical in orientation. It communicates a relationship with a transcendent God who is beyond reach. However, according to Douglas, the design of the Tabernacle transposes the imagery of Mt. Sinai onto the horizontal plane, thereby expressing a relationship with Divine immanence. Douglas focuses on the measurements of the three sections of the *mishkan*- its courtyard, its central section known as the Holy, and its deep interior, the Holy of Holies. She describes how the initial courtyard, accessible to everyone was broadest and then how each succeeding section becomes smaller and narrower, while also admitting fewer people. The Holy section was only accessible to the priests, and finally the Holy of Holies, the smallest section was only available to the High Priest on one day each year. This was also the space where the Presence of God would communicate with Moses. Thus, the structure of the *mishkan* communicated a horizontal representation of the Sinai experience. The nation had gathered at the broad base of the mountain, Aaron and the elders ascended part way up the mountain, and only one man, Moses, ascended to the peak to have direct contact with God. Even the cloud of incense offered inside the Holy of Holies could be understood to

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 47

<sup>12</sup> Douglas, 59-65

represent the cloud of glory that sat upon the top of the Mountain. Douglas asserts that the *mishkan* was designed to be an architectural mnemonic, a physical space that would evoke remembrance of the event at Mt. Sinai through its specific physical structure and design.

In Exodus 25:8, we read “*v’asu li mikdash v’shachanti b’tocham*” God tells Moses to tell the people, “Make me a sanctuary, And I will dwell among them.”<sup>13</sup> In other words: If you create a holy space, My presence will become accessible to you. By creating a sacred space that transforms the vertical experience of a transcendent God into a depth experience, grounded in this physical world of flesh and blood (the sacrifices), You will have access to Me as an immanent presence.

The design of the Tabernacle expresses a Sinaitic experience that penetrates the horizontal plane. It shifts the orientation of relationship from verticality to depth, from outer to inner. This is not to say that the structure of the *mishkan* did not also express hierarchical values. However, Douglas’ theory directs our attention to the possibility of structure expressing the quality of depth as well as height, immanence as well as transcendence. Whereas vertically oriented architecture strives to communicate memories of Sinai, pulls one to the heights and out of one self, the horizontally oriented architecture of the *mishkan* invites one into the depths of oneself for a sacred conversation with the Presence. Sacred spaces that focus exclusively on the transcendent are missing the call of our time. We need spaces that reflect the indwelling of God. We need structures that foster the capacity of the worshiper to enter into his/her own depths and to connect with community.

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<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Biblical and rabbinic texts in this paper are by the author.

## Sacred Contracts

Whether conscious or unconscious, spoken or unspoken, we all agree to maintain certain contracts with one another. This is universal in human society. In traditional synagogue life, we have assigned specific tasks and functions to the Rabbi and Cantor, but we have also unconsciously agreed that the spiritual leader of the community take on spiritual responsibility for the individuals in the community. This relationship has deep roots in the Jewish legal tradition, which allows for certain people to fulfill spiritual obligations for others who are unable to do so for themselves.<sup>14</sup> This is accomplished through the establishment of a *shaliach*. The *shaliach* is a person assigned the task of literally standing before God in the place of the community. Traditionally, a Jewish male adult would perform prayers and mitzvot as a messenger for other people incapable of performing these sacred acts for a variety of reasons, including the lack of prayer books as well as illiteracy. It was understood, and tacitly agreed upon in every Jewish community, that the *shaliach* would fulfill the spiritual obligations of all those unable to perform certain rites on their own. Without knowing who in the community might be unable to adequately perform the mitzvah of prayer, the “*shaliach tzibbur*” assumes the role of messenger for the entire community in every prayer service. This is still the case in traditional communities and in more liberal communities where this role may be fulfilled by Cantors, Rabbis, and laity, both male and female.

Today however, this contract does not resonate for many within our communities. Young people, Generation X (1964-1983), as well as members of the Baby Boom generation (1946-1964) are seeking an active role in their own spiritual development. Not

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<sup>14</sup> BT: Rosh Hashanah 29a and Mishneh Torah: Hilchot B'rachot 1:10-11

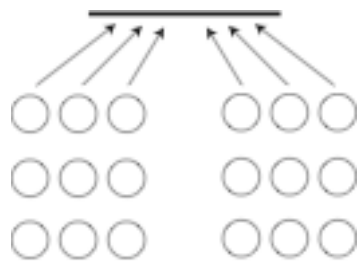
content, stimulated or fulfilled in the role of a passive participant, these Jews are abandoning the synagogue experience for other modes of spiritual expression, such as Buddhism, meditation, and yoga, all of which demand a high level of personal devotion, dedication and inner work. “Gen X demands authenticity and ritual. Its members will favor places that are serious about religious quest and ritual fullness.”<sup>15</sup> While traditional Judaism does, in fact, require a high level of personal devotion and ritual fullness, most of these Jewish seekers are unaware that Judaism provides a path for spiritual development. Non- Orthodox synagogue life in America, for the most part, has not demanded or created serious opportunities for a deep level of personal inner work and spiritual development. The traditional contract between congregations and their spiritual leaders, as expressed by the *shaliach* model, persists despite the fact that it has become largely meaningless for the majority of Jews in America today. We need a new contract with our prayer leaders and we need prayer spaces that support individual spiritual goals, personal responsibility and inner work.

Modern American synagogue architecture and design communicates this contract by placing leadership at the front of a theatre-like space. This design encourages passivity on the part of the congregation which functions more like an audience than a sacred community. According to the study of Proxemics, which examines how people relate to one another in certain spatial settings, certain arrangements encourage full participation while other arrangements discourage participation. A ‘sociofugal’ seating arrangement encourages the people to focus on a single point in the front of a room. This design characterizes most synagogues and also most churches. Father Dick Vosko, a design consultant for worship environments states “A better worship environment for liturgy is

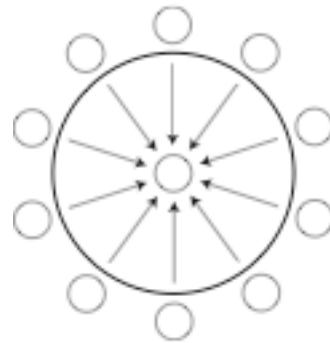
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<sup>15</sup> Hoffman, 201

one that fosters the full participation of every person present. Such an arrangement of any assembly is called a ‘sociopetal’ plan.”<sup>16</sup> In this arrangement the seating is in the round, revolving around a central point where the ritual activities take place. This type of arrangement communicates a new contract. It expresses the values of shared responsibility between clergy and laity as well as community integration.<sup>17</sup>



**Sociofugal**



**Sociopetal**

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<sup>16</sup> Vosko, 58

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*,59. Vosko presents the research on seating arrangements from the field of Proxemics first introduced by researcher Edward Hall in 1966. Proxemics refers to the study of our use of space and how various differences can make us feel more relaxed or anxious.

## Introduction to the Language of Space

Ancient peoples worldwide have shared certain basic concepts regarding the power of space and place. Whether we look at the pyramids of Egypt, the Forbidden City of Ancient China, the temples at Machu Piccu in Peru, or holy shrines in India, each culture developed its own science of geomancy: a system for understanding the relationship between spaces/places and human beings. These systems are based in an understanding of a relationship between time and space, between heaven and earth, between cosmic forces and earthly forces. By incorporating certain shapes, orientations and particular locations, ancient peoples sought to make the most beneficial use of these relationships, to create the most auspicious living and worship spaces for their people. Underlying these concepts was the basic understanding that people are affected in a variety of ways by their environment. Some environments promote health and well-being while others may be toxic, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

Elaborate systems for designing spaces to benefit people developed throughout the ancient world. Two of these systems are still in wide use today and have been experiencing a renaissance of sorts. Feng Shui, the Chinese system for architectural design and placement, influenced models for architectural design throughout much of Asia over the past 5000 years.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Vaastu Shastra, an Indian system of architecture and design, also approximately 5000 years old, is still in use today and becoming popular in the West.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Post, 7

<sup>19</sup> [www.experiencefestival.com/vastu\\_shastra](http://www.experiencefestival.com/vastu_shastra)

These architectural design systems are based, in part, on religious and cultural elements specific to each culture; however, they all share certain fundamental concepts that cross cultural lines and might be considered universal truths. Each of these systems are based on highly specific and developed forms of scientific observation. The natural world and its elements were the objects of fine observation. The cycle of the seasons, the movement of the stars in the heavens, landforms and the flow of water were studied closely. It seemed clear that certain places were more vital and supportive of life than others. Certain landforms were more beneficial to developing civilizations than others. The words 'Feng Shui' mean wind and water. With too much wind and water, life does not prosper. Too much wind creates infertile tundra and too much water creates swamplands. Just enough wind allows for pollination and just enough water allows for life to thrive. Feng Shui is the art and science of creating a balanced environment, which metaphorically utilizes the appropriate amount of wind and water for life to flourish. These fundamental concepts of balance and working in harmony with the natural world lie at the heart of these ancient systems for building and design.

It was understood that people are also part of this larger web of life. By creating spaces/structures that echo the harmony of the natural world, that reflect the natural balance of the elements and the order of the cosmos, people and civilization would prosper. This philosophy is based on the understanding of the interconnectedness of all life, the profound unity of this universe and an acknowledgement that we, as sentient beings, can utilize this awareness to enhance our lives by working within the system of natural law.

The rise in popular interest of Feng Shui in the West over the past fifteen years has been part of a larger shift toward global consciousness. Through the development of

technology, our ability to communicate cross-culturally has broken through pre-existing boundaries. Simultaneously, our understanding of the environmental crisis has forced open our awareness, long understood by the Ancients, that all life on this planet is irrevocably interconnected. Similarly, the growth and development of the many mind/body systems for healing and the concept of holistic health speak to this very same issue. The traditional dualistic understanding of life, which separates man from the earth, the mind from the body, and people from one another have begun to break down. Systems that speak to unity, diversity, sustainability and holism are emerging and gaining strength in modern consciousness.

*Nothing is quite beautiful alone;  
nothing but is beautiful in the whole.  
A single object is only so far beautiful as  
it suggests this universal grace.  
The poet, the musician, the architect  
seek to concentrate  
this radiance of the world on one point.*  
-Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> As quoted in Lawlor, vi.



## Understanding Space

Space speaks to us through its own vocabulary of shape, light, color, texture, sound and smell. All of our senses experience the language of a space when we enter into her domain. We are affected by man-made spaces much as we are affected by places in nature. Standing at the seashore, hearing the rhythmic movement of the waves, seeing the expanse of water and sand, smelling the salty air, we are calmed and invigorated. Sitting at a cluttered desk in a small room, with low light, listening to the sound of weed-whacking from the neighbor's yard, one would likely feel enervated, irritated and lacking focus or inspiration. These are certainly extreme examples, but they demonstrate the power of our environment to affect our mood, level of energy and focus.

More specifically, the shapes of spaces not only convey messages that speak to a very basic level of experience but also deliver messages at a subtle level which affect our energy in different ways. For example, it is understood in many ancient systems of design that a pyramidal shape expresses the elemental nature of fire. Like a flame its energy concentrates as it rises heavenward. Its "prototype is a volcano before it blows its top."<sup>21</sup> This shape was used intentionally by the ancient Egyptians for the tombs of their ancestors in order to facilitate the movement of their spirits from the earthly realm to the spiritual realm. Likewise, churches developed throughout Europe with steeples or spires which convey the same flame-like expression, that of a movement toward heaven.

Our experiences of strong architectural shapes deliver a message, often at an unconscious level, that affects our experience within that space. We may likely feel uplifted in a space with a soaring ceiling, or calmed by a space whose geometry echoes

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<sup>21</sup> Post, 49

that of the human body. Round spaces, such as that of a teepee or yurt evoke the quality of the cosmos, in its echo of the heavenly spheres. They express the qualities of universality, wholeness, and inclusion. Four-sided spaces, squares and rectangles evoke the four directions of the earth and express the qualities of stability, endurance and nurturance. Tremendously large spaces, such as an amphitheater or mega-church tend to draw us out of ourselves, while smaller more intimate spaces draw us deeper into ourselves.

The materials we choose for building our spaces also deliver their own messages by virtue of the qualities of those materials. Wood that is lightly stained will convey a sense of warmth and vitality, which we experience similarly when we enter a young forest. Conversely, a space dominated by darkly stained wood may convey a feeling of dampness, heaviness and a sense of being lost in a deep dark forest. Metal elements convey a crispness, coolness and sense of wealth and majesty to a space. When balanced with wooden elements, this can create a harmonious feeling. Too much metal however, including metallic hues, can create a feeling of chilliness and aloofness. Glass is a transparent but also reflective material evoking the element of water. Depending on its shape and qualities it can promote a sense of meditative reflection or a sense of penetration of the elemental world. In this sense, glass features can communicate the quality of transcendence.

Colors, like materials, communicate different messages depending upon the particular hue, its saturation and its reflective capacities. They can be divided into five basic categories that (according to the principles of Feng Shui) correspond to the five basic elements of the physical world: water, tree, fire, earth and metal. Colors such as red and orange express the fire element, which conveys a dynamic, warm and vitalizing

atmosphere. Fire is also connected to images of God in the Bible. The burning bush represents the presence of God as does the pillar of fire that guards the Israelite camp in the wilderness.

The manner in which the architectural elements of shape, material, texture and color are combined greatly influences the experience of the inhabitants of a space. Also, the placement of significant features, seating plans and foci for activity within the space will convey sociological messages relating to rank and power, exclusion and inclusion.

Understanding the goals of one's space is the primary task for designing any space. Identifying the goals of a sacred community is essential in order to design a sacred space that will inform, enhance and support those goals.

*The things of this world are vessels, entrances for stories;  
when we touch them, we fall into their labyrinthine resonances.  
The world is no longer divided, then, into those inconvenient categories  
of subject and object, and the world becomes religiously apprehended.*

-Lynda Sexson<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> As quoted in Lawlor, 24

## Understanding Place

Human beings seek order and predictability in their world. We seek patterns and create categories and systems to organize our findings. Ancient peoples as well as modern scientists are driven by this same basic need to understand our place in the world, our relationship to the cosmos and to the earth.

In response to this existential human need, ancient peoples worldwide developed elaborate spatial systems to express their world-view and cosmology. In effect, these systems attempt to answer the question (both metaphorically and literally): what is humanity's place in the world? These systems are found across a broad geographical area that stretches from Egypt to India, China and Southeast Asia and includes the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> They all share certain basic features. They orient the individual and the community to the four cardinal directions. These systems of orientation communicate one's place in the world in relation to the forces of the cosmos and the earth. They give meaning to the cycles of time, the seasons, and the rhythms of nature. They express cultural values and convey a sense of order to the world. The concept of *as above so below*, the relationship of microcosm to macrocosm, permeates all of these frameworks. They express the unity of Creation.

It is this experience of the unity of Creation that imbues one with a sense of the sacred. Thus it follows that architecture, which echoes the unity and harmony of the world, in a small accessible space, conveys a sense of the sacred to the inhabitants that is readily perceived.<sup>24</sup> “Sacredness is found in everyday architecture by perceiving the

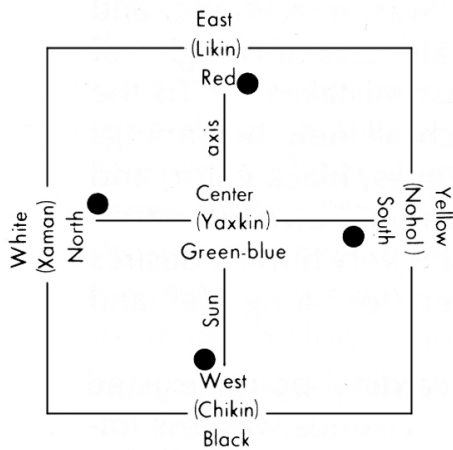
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<sup>23</sup> Tuan, 91

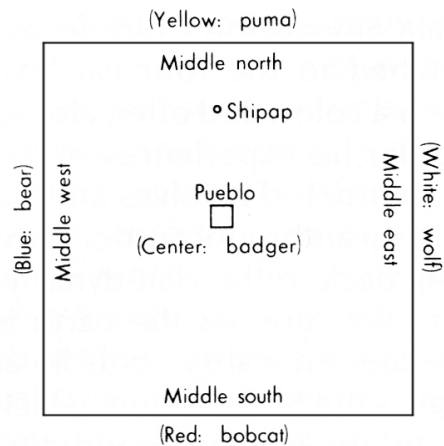
<sup>24</sup> *ibid*,100

relationships between the many levels of its totality – mind, body, environment, home, community and cosmos.”<sup>25</sup>

The following diagrams portray just a few of the systems of orientation utilized by different cultures from east to west. Note Ptolemy’s system, which includes an orientation to the heavenly constellations as well as to the earthly directions.<sup>26</sup>



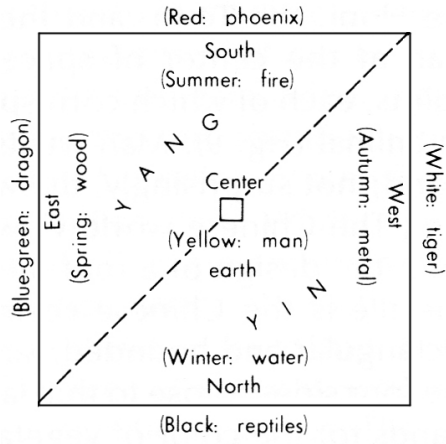
Classic Maya World View



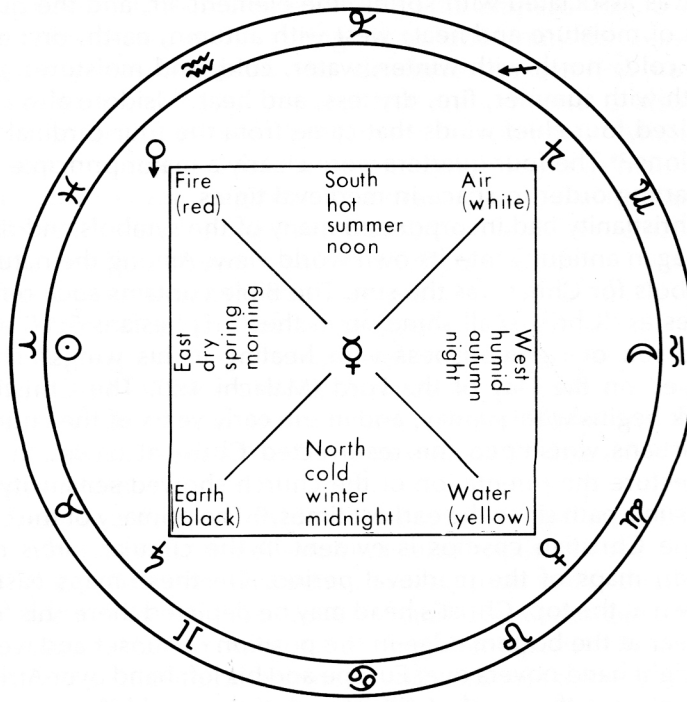
Pueblo Indian World View

<sup>25</sup> Lawlor, xii

<sup>26</sup> These four diagrams were reprinted from Tuan, 94-95.



Traditional Chinese World View



Ptolemy's View of the Cosmos

These systems all share certain general features while differing in specifics. All utilize the four cardinal directions as orienting metaphors and connect colors to each direction. Each direction represents a gestalt with accompanying layers of projections. Like a flower, the *direction* is a concept at the center of an unfolding array of petals. The essence of a certain direction is thereby expressed also as a color, as an animal spirit, as a time of day, a season, and as an element (earth, water, air, fire). Each of the four directions expresses a foundational aspect of Creation, a building block of sorts which when brought together as one, expresses the unity of the natural world.

Ancient Israel, like her neighbors, utilized a system of orientation to the four directions. This is recorded in the Torah in her description of the construction and placement of the *mishkan*<sup>27</sup> as well as for the arrangement of the Israelite camp.<sup>28</sup> The system of orientation of the Tabernacle and the Israelite camp contain within them an expression of the cultural values and spiritual goals of the community. When explored in detail, these specifications (largely overlooked by modern Bible scholars) reveal a world-view that was grounded in the natural world while also expressing a bridge to the heavenly realm of Y-H-V-H. Not surprisingly, the Ancient Israelites described a spatial system of orientation for the *mishkan* that reflected an understanding common throughout the contemporary pagan world. Jon Levinson in his book, *Sinai and Zion*, explains that one of the purposes of the Bible was to express those ideas that *separated* the Israelites from their surrounding neighbors. The Bible consistently focuses on what distinguishes the Israelites but not on what they shared with other Ancient Near East civilizations. Features of the culture that were *shared* with other communities, that were largely

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<sup>27</sup> Exodus: 25-27

<sup>28</sup> Numbers 1-2

ubiquitous, remain unexplained within the Bible.<sup>29</sup> I suggest that the silence in the Bible regarding the meaning behind the architectural elements and design of both the *mishkan* and the Temple is due to this motivation. That the design elements are not explained or discussed in terms other than directives, suggests that the meaning behind the design was in many ways, consistent with the worldview of the Ancient Near East and not unique to Israelite culture. Levinson states, “It is therefore not surprising that the text of the Hebrew Bible is so taciturn about the theology of the Temple. It does not tell us the meanings of the iconography; we have to reconstruct them.”<sup>30</sup> That the architectural elements of the *mishkan* and her vessels were extremely important to ancient Israelite culture is evident in the thirteen chapters of Torah devoted to their description. While their meanings are not discussed, we nevertheless possess a rich comparative language for understanding space and place in the ancient world. This will allow us to begin to unpack the meaning of space and place within the Jewish tradition. A detailed study of the *mishkan*, which parses its spatial language within the context of universal concepts of space and place, can offer contemporary relevance for re-envisioning and constructing Jewish sacred spaces for our time. This will be further elaborated in the third section of this paper.

Today, we appreciate placement relative to energy efficiency. We site our buildings to maximize passive solar energy, brightness of rooms and a desire for views. But we have lost or dismissed the concept of subtle influences, cosmic and earth forces, upon us and their effects in shaping consciousness and promoting well-being. We have forgotten or dismissed a *mythic* approach to space and place, which expresses the unity of God’s Creation within its parts: space as a devotional psalm to the grand revelation of Creation.

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<sup>29</sup> Levenson, 120-121

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 120



Today we need our sacred spaces to convey the unity of Creation and the mystery of diversity within that unity. I suggest that the *mishkan*, can serve as a model for a system of understanding sacred space, and that modern sanctuaries would benefit from employing these design concepts.

## Part Two

### **An Abbreviated History of the Development of Synagogue Spaces**

According to Jewish tradition, the first man-made sacred space in recorded Jewish history was the Tabernacle of the wilderness period. Following the specifications given to Moses by God, the Israelites constructed this portable space, which served as the focus for the worship of Y-H-V-H during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. While this is not a historical statement, it expresses the mythos that has accompanied the Jewish people for at least the past 2000 years and has helped to shape the psychology, theology and philosophy of the people. It is taught that Joshua erected the Tabernacle in the Land of Israel in the eleventh century BCE, where it remained the spiritual center of the Jewish people up until the completion of the Temple of Solomon. History confirms that the Temple in Jerusalem was the centralized sacred space for the Jewish people from 953 BCE until its destruction in c. 586 BCE. The basic design of the Tabernacle, as recorded in the Torah, and the design of the Temple are clearly related. According to the historical/critical school of Bible scholarship that suggests the emergence of the Torah as a sacred text during the Davidic monarchy, it has been suggested that the description of the *mishkan* in the Torah was based on the extant structure of the Temple.<sup>31</sup> This is however not universally accepted.

Nahum Sarna in his book *Exploring Exodus*, argues most convincingly to the contrary. Based on philological evidence as well as historical evidence for the use of portable tent-like shrines in the ancient Near East, Sarna builds a strong case for the pre-existence of the *mishkan*. He states that specific “Egyptian finds exhibiting similar portable canopy-

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<sup>31</sup> Brettler, 76

like structures testify to the prevalence of the basic construction technique of the Israelite Tabernacle long before Mosaic times.”<sup>32</sup> Cassuto provides strong archeological and philological evidence as well for the pre-existence of the Tabernacle. He states, “The correspondence (between the architectural concepts expressed in the Tabernacle) and the concepts of early antiquity proves beyond doubt that the composition of the sections (of Torah) dealing with the construction of the Tabernacle cannot be attributed to the period of the Second Temple. The priests of that age could not know the notions prevailing among the ancient generations...if the subject-matter of the text fits the generation of the wilderness, there is no reason to doubt its historicity.”<sup>33</sup>

According to Biblical narrative, Rabbinic tradition, and evidence from historical artifacts,<sup>34</sup> the *mishkan* appears to have preceded the Temple and provided the template for its basic design. Both spaces share similar structural features, such as the division of space, the orientation of the structure and placement of vessels contained within. The primary difference between the structures was that the Temple was a landed building for a landed people. While according to tradition, the Tabernacle resided in one location in the land of Israel for a long period (Tel Shilo in Ephraim Hills)<sup>35</sup> it nevertheless was built as a portable structure and retained this quality of transience through the language of its structure. Its portability communicates the message that God dwells wherever the people who worship God may dwell. According to Marc Brettler, a contemporary Bible scholar, the theology of the book of Exodus “allows God to be worshiped at a plurality of sanctuaries; in the words of Exodus 20:21; ‘Make for me an altar of earth and sacrifice on

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<sup>32</sup> Sarna, 199

<sup>33</sup> Cassuto, 324

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 196-200

<sup>35</sup> Gold, 3

it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you.’ In contrast Deuteronomy’s theology is that God must properly be worshipped only in the *one* place that God has chosen for his name to dwell.”<sup>36</sup>

This Exodus theology of a God who wanders with its people, expressed through the structure of the Tabernacle, became the necessary metaphor for the survival of the Jewish people following the Babylonian exile. Unable to offer sacrifices due to the loss of place, prayer began to emerge as a necessary tool, a portable service replacing sacrifices as a means for expressing devotion to God. The first mention of “a little sanctuary” by Ezekiel, the first post-exilic prophet, may be the first allusion to what would become the synagogue for an exiled people. The prophet cries out to God, expressing his fear that even the remnant of Israel will not survive the exile. To this God responds by saying, “ though I have removed them far away among the nations, and though I have scattered them among the lands, yet have I been for them a ‘small sanctuary’ in the lands where they have arrived.”<sup>37</sup> The Targum, a traditional commentary on the Bible written during the second temple period, understands this statement to be a reference to the development of synagogues throughout the Diaspora, beginning in the sixth century BCE.

Archeological evidence, however attests to the existence of synagogues much later, in the mid-third century BCE in Egypt. Certainly by the first century CE, the synagogue emerges as a “well established and ancient institution, the very center of the social and religious life of the people, unrivaled in the Diaspora and harmoniously cooperating with

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<sup>36</sup> Brettler, 89

<sup>37</sup> Ezekiel 11:16

the Temple in Erez Israel.”<sup>38</sup> The majority of evidence for the existence of synagogues within every community throughout the Diaspora during the first century CE comes from the New Testament, in which Paul mentions all of the synagogues wherein he preached throughout his travels in Asia Minor.<sup>39</sup> Contemporary archeological discoveries corroborate the widespread presence of synagogues throughout these regions in the Greco-Roman period.<sup>40</sup>

Following the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE, the sacrificial service ceased completely and synagogues, though already well established, became the primary focus for communal worship and Jewish religious life. The preservation of the priestly class became an important political issue and we find this theme reflected in the mosaic artwork of many Palestinian synagogues of the first three centuries CE. They depict acts of ritual slaughter and the holy vessels of the Temple. (images) Additionally, the development of *piyyutim* in this period that describe the priestly courses, (the schedules of priestly family Temple obligations) the names of the priestly families and their homes suggests the need to preserve the memory and standing of the priestly families.<sup>41</sup>

“Ancient synagogues became the locus of priestly memorialization of Temple liturgy and the symbolic re-creation of Temple space through certain physical actions.”<sup>42</sup> It has been suggested by numerous contemporary scholars, that while the rising power of the Rabbinic stream in the early centuries of the first millennium expressed itself through teaching, preaching and adjudicating, the Priestly class maintained their presence and

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<sup>38</sup> Rabinowitz and Posner, 582

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

<sup>40</sup> Fine, 5

<sup>41</sup> Magness, 23-24. It is of note that many of the *paytanim* were of the priestly class and it was the priests who recited the *piyyutim* as a form of offerings.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, 14 as quoted from Joan Branham’s “Sacred Space Under Erasure in Ancient Synagogues and Early Churches,” *The Art Bulletin*, LXXIV, 3, 1992, 391

even increased their power in synagogues as the ritual leaders of liturgical practices well into the fifth century CE.<sup>43</sup>

Magness, in her article “Heaven on Earth: Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues” details the striking similarities between the iconography of early Byzantine churches and early Palestinian synagogues. She suggests that these images express each group’s claims to be the rightful heirs to the Temple cult. “The development of monumental synagogue architecture and art in Palestine beginning in the fourth century should be understood against the background of Christian attempts to appropriate the Jewish heritage.”<sup>44</sup> Early Christian iconography reflects the belief that, whereas the sacrifices of the Temple provided atonement in the past, Jesus is the new vehicle for atonement. Early churches reflect these ideas by incorporating images from the Temple into their design motifs. “Not only did Jews and early Christians claim the Temple, but they sometimes depicted it in a similar manner, as seen in the mosaic floors of the synagogue at Khirbet Susiya and the chapel of the Priest John at Mount Nebo.”<sup>45</sup> Thus begins the architectural polemic between synagogues, churches and mosques that remain an important influence in synagogue development and design throughout all ages of Jewish history.

Synagogue development consistently expresses the cultural norms of society in design and architecture. Influences from churches and mosques played a significant role in these developments. As expected, we find that Sephardic synagogues throughout the ages express the spatial aesthetic values of eastern cultures. Maimonides records that in his day (10<sup>th</sup> Cent.) worshipers in Spanish and some Babylonian synagogues would spread

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 50

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 15

out mats on the ground for sitting. This is in contrast to the chairs used in synagogues of Western Europe.<sup>46</sup> In Yemenite synagogues today, as in mosques, we still find that men “enter only after removing their shoes, and seat themselves on the rugs which cover the floor.”<sup>47</sup>

This cross-cultural pollination of ideas regarding sacred space is evident in another surprising aspect of the ancient Palestinian synagogues whose remains were discovered in the early 1960’s in Hammath, Tiberias. In several of these synagogues, floor mosaics were discovered which depicted the symbols of the zodiac surrounding a central figure recognized as Helios, the Greek personification of the sun.



Mosaic Floor at Beth Alpha<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> MT: Hil. Tef. 11:5

<sup>47</sup> Kaploun, 35

<sup>48</sup> From website: [greatsynagogue.org.au](http://greatsynagogue.org.au)

Stephen Fine asserts, "Significantly, the only distinctively Jewish contents that can be identified in the Sepphoris mosaic are the Torah shrine panel and the images of vessels from the Temple cult. In fact, without the menorahs and the Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic inscriptions, the synagogue floor might be mistaken for a church mosaic!"<sup>49</sup> Recalling Ptolemy's chart for understanding orientation relative to earthly space and the movement of the heavenly constellations, these mosaics express a consistent ancient world-view. The mosaics express the common ancient understanding of sacred space as that which creates a bridge between space and time, between the heavens and the earth. By placing this image of the heavens on the floor, the space "announces" that here in this place, the heavens touch the earth.

The idea of sacred space as a bridge between heaven and earth is reflected in the very foundational quality of the *mishkan*. God's initial command to Moses, stating "*v'asu li mikdash v'shakhanti b'tocham* – Make a Tabernacle for me and I will dwell in their midst"<sup>50</sup> expresses the guiding principle behind the establishment of a sacred space. Make this place where God's immanence can be experienced, where heaven and earth can come together in holy dialogue. The Holy of Holies focalized this idea into one location wherein God would communicate with Moses.

The architectural representation of heaven on earth was accomplished through the development of cupolas and domed roofs in the Early Byzantine churches. This shape expresses the dome of heaven, brought down to earth. A Syriac hymn on Hagia Sophia in the cathedral church of Edessa, "indicates that by the mid-sixth century Christians associated the central dome in a church with cosmology and mystical theology. The

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<sup>49</sup> Magness, 15

<sup>50</sup> Exodus 25:8



hymn describes the interior of the church as a place where "heaven and earth" meet, and explicitly compares the ceiling to the sky and the dome to the highest heaven."<sup>51</sup> The domed ceiling developed first in churches and mosques, then extended to government buildings in Europe and the United States as a means of expressing the connection with heaven. This architectural language expresses the power of the legislative body as deriving from heaven and as an extension of God's law upon the earth.

As early as the first century CE, synagogues were fulfilling social and communal functions as well as ritual needs. Many synagogues of Late Antiquity served as meeting houses for social discourse, held court proceedings, collected and dispensed charity (including development of soup kitchens) housed schools for young children and provided lodging for the needy wayfarer.<sup>52</sup> A first century Jerusalem synagogue inscription records the name of Theodotus son of Vettenos who built the synagogue as a place for "the reading of the Torah, the teaching of the commandments, and also built the hospice and chambers and water installations for lodging needy strangers."<sup>53</sup> By the Middle Ages, these multiple communal functions became universally entwined in synagogue architecture design. The foundations for Jewish life as expressed in M. Avot 1:2, *Torah, Avodah* and *Gemilut Hasadim*, Torah (study), Prayer and Acts of Loving-kindness became solidified in structure and form through the central institution and building design of the synagogue.

Steven Fine, in his book *This Holy Place* explains that the synagogue develops as "a holy place", a *maqom kadosh*, after the destruction of the second Temple. Its *kedushah*/sanctity was derived from the presence of the "Sacred Scripture"- the Torah-

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<sup>51</sup> Magness, 16

<sup>52</sup> Levine, 390-411

<sup>53</sup> Kaploun, 7

within its midst. Additionally, active memory of the Temple was preserved in the development of specific fixed prayers and rituals. “The templization of synagogues was strengthened by the localization there of daily liturgy modeled loosely upon the Temple service. As in the Temple, the assembly could meet the Divine through communal liturgy in synagogues.”<sup>54</sup> This combination of a renewed emphasis on Torah study and the development of the Torah as a “cult object”<sup>55</sup> together with the need to memorialize Temple practices, expresses the tension between the present and the past. It is therefore not surprising that the ancient synagogues of Palestine, with their mosaic depictions of Temple practices and inscriptions honoring of the priestly families, remained in use into the early Middle Ages. This suggests that the ebbing of the power of the priests as spiritual leaders and the rising power of the rabbinic enterprise was a slow and gradual process. However, over time, as rabbinic teaching succeeded in transforming Temple memory into formalized ritual and prayer, and in elevating Torah study to a holy act, synagogue structures developed to reflect these rabbinic ideals.

Maimonides’ epic legal treatise, the *Mishneh Torah*, written in the twelfth century, records the laws for the building of a synagogue. He writes that any place where there live a group of ten men, it is incumbent upon them to build a synagogue and acquire a *sefer Torah*. The building must be taller than the other buildings in the city and must have its entrances facing the East, like that of the Mishkan. A sanctuary should be built in order to house the Torah and the people must face this ark when praying. In the center of the synagogue should be a raised platform for reading the Torah and for teaching the

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<sup>54</sup> Fine, 36

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, 159

community.<sup>56</sup> As Fine points out, it was the presence of the Torah, its recitation and study, which conveyed holiness to the synagogue.

The design of the synagogue in the Middle Ages reflected this Rabbinic concept of holiness by emphasizing the centrality of Torah, prayer and Rabbinic leadership. The central *bima* in all medieval synagogues expressed the emphasis on Torah and prayer as the primary tools for accessing a relationship with God. The priest was replaced by the rabbi/sage, who taught and lectured to his community from the *bima*. The social structure of the village was also reflected in the arrangement of seating in the synagogue. The Rabbi, scholars, and men of high status in the community relative to business, wealth and community participation were seated closest to the ark, closest to the eastern wall. However, common folk, the indigent, beggars and strangers sat behind them at a greater distance from the eastern wall.<sup>57</sup> This type of hierarchical seating arrangement, reflecting social status, can be seen up to this day in some synagogues in which wealthy patrons own certain seats as well as in the placement of throne-like chairs upon many American *bimas*. While many synagogues no longer use these chairs to honor social status within the community, their presence nevertheless reminds us of a hierarchical political structure which is being increasingly rejected by worshipers in the twenty-first century.

In the paradigm shift from post-Temple times to medieval times, from early Palestinian synagogue design to Medieval Torah-centered synagogues, a mystical element of connectivity seems to have been lost. The quality of a sacred space that connects the worshiper to the earth, to the surrounding cosmos and to God, that functions as a microcosm of Creation, has all but disappeared. As expressed through the sacred

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<sup>56</sup> MT: Hil Tef. 11:1-3

<sup>57</sup> Kaploun, 28

architecture of the *mishkan*, through the permanent structure in the Temple, and eventually pollinated through the early Byzantine churches and Palestinian synagogues, these sacred architectural forms were abandoned alongside the shift from priestly power to rabbinic leadership. The concept of sacred space as that which reflects the order of earthly and cosmic forces was replaced with a concept of sacred space as defined by the presence of a sacred object (the torah).<sup>58</sup> God becomes accessible through the mind, anywhere, and the sacred body of the earth appears to have been left behind in the ruins of Jerusalem.

I suggest that the goals of these ancient sacred spaces: the creation of a bridge between heaven and earth, a meeting place for the transcendent with the immanent nature of God, are the very spiritual goals that modern worshipers are seeking today. A sanctuary that reawakens a sense of the Divine in the realm of space can serve the holy purpose of awakening consciousness to the Divine, to the preciousness of Creation and our duty to sustain Her. Accordingly, the template of the *mishkan* can be viewed as a prototype for Jewish sacred space, a useful model for re-envisioning modern synagogue spaces.

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<sup>58</sup> A significant number of ancient synagogues (pre-70 C.E.) in Judea and in the Diaspora were situated next to bodies of water. Levine (114) states that the reason for this is unclear but may be due to the needs for ritual immersion. I would suggest it may also have been an expression of the relationship between human beings, the natural world and God.

## The Wooden Synagogues of Poland

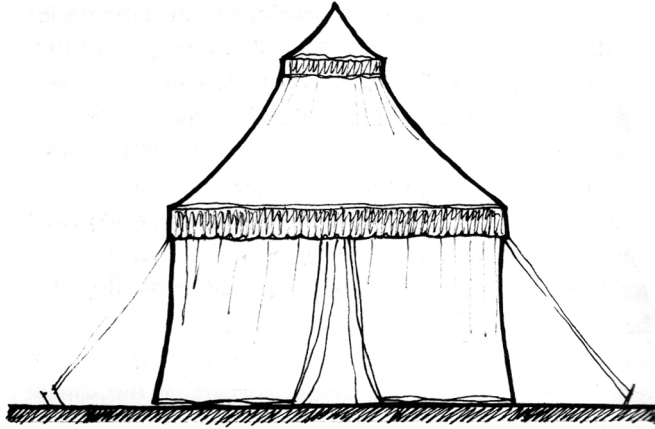
Over time, old themes reemerge in new forms. The tent-like Tabernacle structure resurfaces in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the form of the wooden synagogues of the Podolian region of Poland. At this time, concepts of Jewish mysticism were spreading throughout Europe as the kabalistic text of the Zohar became popularized throughout the region. “By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Zohar had achieved the status of a sacred, canonical text and was used throughout the small towns of Poland.”<sup>59</sup> Kabbalistic practices such as *Kabbalat Shabbat* were becoming popular in mainstream religious practice, as were the use of preparatory mystical prayers known as *kavvanot*. Hubka, in his book *Resplendent Synagogue*, explains that the architecture of the wooden synagogues in this period reflect these developments. This will be explained in more detail further on in this paper.

The wooden synagogues were shaped to create the impression of a tent, with a pyramid shaped cupola at the very top. The shape of the cupola of the Gwozdziec Synagogue “was modeled after a Polish/Ottoman tent and was intended to symbolize the Tent of the Tabernacle.”<sup>60</sup> (See diagram of an Ottoman tent and some examples of the wooden synagogues displaying their unique tent-like shapes.)

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<sup>59</sup> Hubka, 143

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, 20



An Ottoman Tent <sup>61</sup>

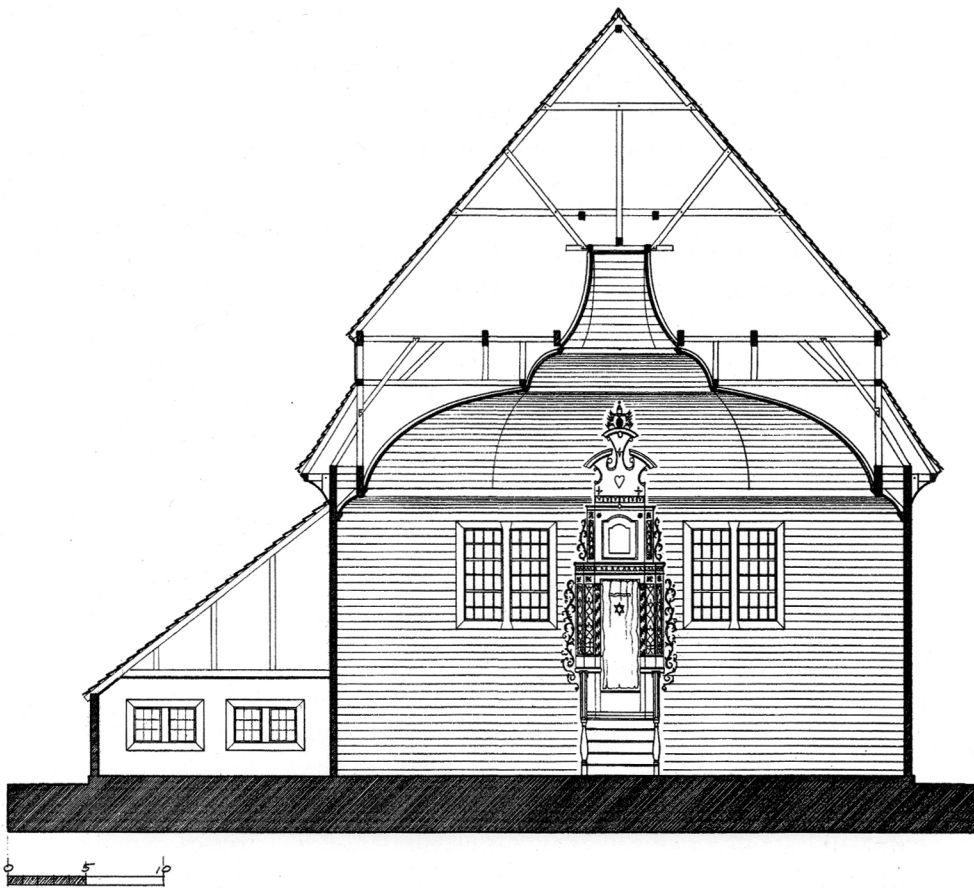


The Wolpa Synagogue <sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Hubka, 34

<sup>62</sup> [shtetlinks.jewishgen.org](http://shtetlinks.jewishgen.org)



Cross section of the Gwozdziec Synagogue <sup>63</sup>

Like the early Palestinian synagogues, astrological symbols are painted on the cupola of the Gwozdziec Synagogue, indicating man's relationship to the cosmos and echoing the dome of heaven. The interior spaces of the wooden synagogues are covered with paintings alive with symbolism, referencing cultural memory as well as universal truths related to space and time.

The interior walls were painted as individual panels, filled with verses and quotes from the prayer book and adorned with floral motifs consistent with the folk art designs

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<sup>63</sup> Hubka, 55

of the region. The panels gave the effect of a super-sized illuminated prayer book surrounding the community. The worshiper becomes a point of intention within a structure that breathes the language of worship from all sides and in all dimensions.

These designs are rich with meaning and metaphorically complex. The space simultaneously references the Tabernacle as well as the grand tents of Turkish nobility conquered by Poland in 1683. Following the conquest, the personal tents of the Ottoman Grand Vizier were seized and brought to Poland. These tents were designed with raised conical tops and are echoed by the cupolas of the wooden synagogues. The image of the Ottoman tent became a symbol for Polish nationalism, “an inspiration for the artistic portrayal of Polish culture- an inspiration that has continued to the present day.”<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, the design of the arks, (used to house the Torah), borrowed Baroque motifs used by the Catholic Churches in these regions. By combining local political and artistic folk influences, design references to the Tabernacle, and kabbalistic imagery, the wooden synagogues of Poland speak a complex architectural language of past and present, religious devotion and nationalism, individuality and community, earth and sky, immanence and transcendence.

Hubka suggests that the specific design of these synagogues and their artwork (the elaborate interior painted walls) directly reflect artistic and architectural indications given in the Zohar.<sup>65</sup> The square shape of the buildings, the 3:1 ratio of wall decorations, and the number and placement of windows all refer to specific building directives detailed in the Zohar for the design of a sanctuary. All of these design specifications reflect the Zoharic concept ‘as above so below’, that the earthly sanctuary should be a mirror of the

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, 35

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, 140-149



eternal heavenly sanctuary. “It all matched, for everything that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in this world, was created on the pattern of the world above, and it was all delineated in the construction of the Tabernacle.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, the wooden synagogues of Poland made explicit this esoteric concept through their artwork and design details.

The art and architecture of the wooden synagogues of eighteenth century Poland manifest in physical form the concept of connectedness on all levels, while producing rather fantastic and magical spaces for worship. These unique prayer spaces provide a stunning example of how a ‘modern’ community can create a truly sacred space that weaves together mythic memory with contemporary meaning and timeless spiritual wisdom.

### **Modern Synagogues**

The eighteenth century marked several significant changes in the design of synagogues. Two major ideological shifts occurred in the landscape of Jewish thought and spirituality. This period gave rise to both the enlightenment (*Haskalah*), a move toward secularism and inclusion in the wider cultural milieu of the day, and to Hasidism, a movement that “downgraded the formality of the synagogue service” in favor of religious fervor as an accompaniment to prayer.<sup>67</sup> Thus, synagogue designs of this period shifted dramatically.

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<sup>66</sup> Tishby, 910 as quoted from Zohar II 220b-221a

<sup>67</sup> Posner, 584

Hasidism downplayed material extravagance as an expression of devotion and instead promoted intense emotional expression. Large, beautifully adorned spaces were rejected in favor of informal, small, unadorned spaces known as *shtibls* (small rooms) throughout much of Eastern Europe. “Here, in unpretentious and unembellished premises, fervor and inner feeling were prized over decorous orderliness, the sense of awe was dispelled by joyousness...”<sup>68</sup> Additionally, the intentionally small size of these spaces creates a crowding of people, which lends additional intensity to the prayer experience. This concept of using size to create emotional and spiritual pressure is a useful design concept that should be taken into consideration when constructing contemporary prayer spaces.

While most Hasidim utilized small, unadorned prayer spaces, the modern period in Western Europe also saw the development of monumental synagogue spaces modeled after the great churches and mosques of the region.<sup>69</sup> No longer subject to medieval laws that limited the size and design of Jewish prayer space, eighteenth century European Jews expressed their liberation and affluence by building grand monumental synagogues. “With the exception of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi synagogues of Golden Age Amsterdam, monumentality and conspicuousness had not been typical of Jewish houses of worship. On the contrary, until the second half of the nineteenth century most synagogues in Europe were modest, unassuming buildings.”<sup>70</sup> However, during this age of emancipation, medieval building restrictions on Jewish houses of prayer, as well as economic restrictions were lifted. Jewish communities prospered and developed a bona-fide bourgeoisie. No longer needing to hide their religious expression, and eager to express their cultural sophistication, Jewish communities initiated monumental

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<sup>68</sup> Kaploun, 27

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*

<sup>70</sup> Coenen, 3

synagogue building projects all over Europe. “Particularly from the 1860s onward, Moorish-style structures, bold in color and elaborate in design, began to adorn Europe’s cities, arresting the gaze of passersby and proudly demanding recognition. These “urban exclamation marks,” as Primo Levi referred to them, reflected a conscious decision on the part of Jews to advertise their adherence to their faith at a time when doing so had become optional. Monumental synagogues thus became visual expressions of how Jews saw themselves and how they wanted to be seen by their contemporaries – as confident bourgeois citizens whose faith in progress and sense of security permitted the public celebration of Judaism.”<sup>71</sup> These trends extended to the United States and included Orthodox synagogues built with Moorish themes as well.<sup>72</sup>

In concert with these sociological changes, the rise of the Reform movement added new theological and cultural dimensions to synagogue design. Referred to as Temples, these edifices expressed the desire for acculturation by incorporating design elements found in European Churches (organs, choir lofts, straight pews and mixed seating). Formality, high culture, grandiosity and acculturation were the values expressed by these spaces.

The twentieth century witnessed high degrees of artistic freedom and individuality in synagogue design throughout the United States. Given the affluence of twentieth century Jewry, combined with the lack of architectural restrictions, U.S. synagogues drew upon a wide variety of influences including “ the classical Greek Temple, the Moorish mosque, the Gothic cathedral, the Byzantine Romanesque church, and the Colonial American

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid*, 6-7

<sup>72</sup> Kaploun, 95

Church.”<sup>73</sup> It is difficult to find much consistency in twentieth century design other than the steady presence of an elaborate ark on the eastern wall to house the Torahs, a *bima* and seating for the community. However, one significant trend began in 1945, in the US and Europe. Synagogues began to be utilized as community centers, rather than merely houses of worship. Despite the wave of modern and post-modern design, these structures are quite reminiscent of the synagogues of Late Antiquity in their efforts to meet non-religious community needs. Synagogue buildings across denominations incorporated schools, large social halls, kitchens, small chapels and sometimes gymnasiums along with the sanctuary. As we move into the twenty-first century, more and more of these synagogue community centers are unable to fill their sanctuaries. As a result, many are closing their doors for the last time.

### **Part Three**

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid*, 98

## The Mishkan as Template for Modern Jewish Sacred Space

The following is divided into four sections, each addressing how the architectural language of the *mishkan* can serve as a model for modern worship spaces. Each section references one of the goals set forth earlier in this paper:

- 1) Connecting with the deep Self- Inner Work
- 2) Connecting with others - Relationship building
- 3) Connecting with the earth - Guardianship
- 4) Connecting with God as immanent and transcendent.

Each of these four sections will provide a variety of architectural and design suggestions for constructing sacred space. The following design guidelines are based on principles extracted from a multivalent understanding of the architecture of the *mishkan*.

### Connecting With The Deep Self

*Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true  
And in thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for you.*<sup>74</sup>

Within the Torah, the first acknowledgment, by a person, of a physical place- a *maqom*, understood to be intrinsically sacred, occurs in Genesis 28. Jacob leaves his birthplace and while en route to his uncle's home, encounters a *place*. The text reads "He encountered a certain place, and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set." (GEN

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<sup>74</sup> Chorus of The Sanctuary Song, an Appalatian Christian Folk Song.

28:11) Midrashic tradition teaches that the word *va'yiph-ga* –*encountered* refers to prayer and the word *maqom* – *place*, refers to God.<sup>75</sup> For as R. Yehoshua ben Levi taught, there is no such thing as an encounter (with God) other than prayer.<sup>76</sup> Through prayer we encounter the divine being. The midrash also states that God is referred to as the Place, for God is “the Place of the universe, while the universe is not His place.”<sup>77</sup>

Jacob spends the night alone, sleeping on the ground, with a stone for his pillow. He dreams of a ladder, upon which angelic beings ascend and descend, while God stands above/beside him. He receives a blessing from God and awakens. At this moment he exclaims, “ Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God and that is the gateway to heaven.” (Gen 28:16-17)

Aviva Zornberg offers a characterization of Jacob’s temperament as one of simplicity, harmony, structure and inwardness based on his description in Genesis as a “simple man who dwelled in tents” unlike his brother Esau who was a “man of the field.”<sup>78</sup> Rashi cites the *midrash* that Jacob spent fourteen years studying in the *yeshivah* of Ever.<sup>79</sup> Zornberg points out that Rashi uses the term *nikbar-was buried* in the school of Aver, further accenting his inwardness. Given Zornberg’s interpretation of Jacob, it is interesting to note the *midrash* that, unlike Abraham who finds God on the mountain and Isaac who finds God in the field, Jacob finds God within a *bayit*,<sup>80</sup> the *bayit* of his own psyche, within a dream. He names the place of the encounter *Beit-El*, House of God, reflecting a

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<sup>75</sup> See Midrash Rabbah 68:9

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*

<sup>78</sup> Zornberg, 183-184 on Gen 25:27

<sup>79</sup> See Rashi on Gen 28:9

<sup>80</sup> B. Pesachim 88a

sense of structure. And, *Beit El* becomes the destined location for The House of God, the *beit hamikdash*, an externalization of Jacob's inner experience, a bridge/ladder between heaven and earth.

Jacob enters into himself in the darkness of the night. Another *midrash* states that God caused the sun to sink in order that He might speak with Jacob privately.<sup>81</sup> The Midrash implies that this encounter is one of intimacy. It is an intimacy sought after not only by Jacob, but by God as well. We see an allusion to this concept of God seeking intimacy with the Jewish people in Exodus 25:8. God tells Moses to tell the people, "Make me a sanctuary and I will dwell within *them- b'tokham*." That is: if you create a sanctified space, I will enter and dwell within the people. The people will have an experience of God's presence if they make a space for that encounter.

Like Jacob, many today are seeking a more personal and intimate encounter with the Divine. Meditative techniques are frequently being incorporated into the worship service, thereby creating an opportunity for congregants to enter into their own interior space and do the inner work of spiritual development. The design of the sanctuary can be effective in facilitating such experiences, but they can also create obstacles to this kind of inner work through the language of the architecture. Sanctuaries that are overly large in scale, which accentuate the vertical axis with very high ceilings, and that communicate distance in the lengthy sight lines from congregant to *bima*, convey a sense of distance, of transcendence over immanence, grandeur over intimacy. Rather than a vertical orientation, evocative of the mountain, many modern worshippers are seeking a depth orientation, which is reminiscent of the *mishkan*.

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<sup>81</sup> See Midrash Rabbah 68:10

Bachelard, in his classic volume, *The Poetics of Space* describes the human need for small intimate spaces in order to allow the imagination to take flight. He quotes Baudelaire, that in a palace, “there is no place for intimacy.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, in a palatial synagogue, the architecture itself *can* act as a barrier to encountering the Divine. But in a space that echoes the qualities of a safe nest or the simplicity of a hermit’s hut, a sense of refuge is achieved that draws one into oneself and provides a “concentration of intimacy.”<sup>83</sup> Through contemplation, the dreamer (the Jacob in each of us) is transported out of the limited space of the immediate world and into an encounter with the Infinite. A physical space that communicates intimacy encourages the inner experience of immensity, for the inner world knows no boundaries and opens up a limitless landscape for discovery.

The geometry of the *mishkan* expresses the language of intimacy through its depth orientation, as opposed to the vertical orientation (and size) of the mountain.<sup>84</sup>

As the High Priest moves deeper into the structure, a deeper level of intimacy with the Divine is available for experience. The *mishkan* contains three primary areas: the courtyard containing the main altar, the *kodesh* section containing the holy vessels (*menorah*, show-bread table and incense altar) and the *kodesh kodashim* containing the Holy Ark. Each successive area is smaller than the preceding one, more restricted in access and yet, allowing for more contact with God. The arrangement of the holy vessels accentuate this depth orientation, through their positioning relative to one another.

Forming a spine through the center of the *mishkan*, the main altar is aligned with the

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<sup>82</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 29

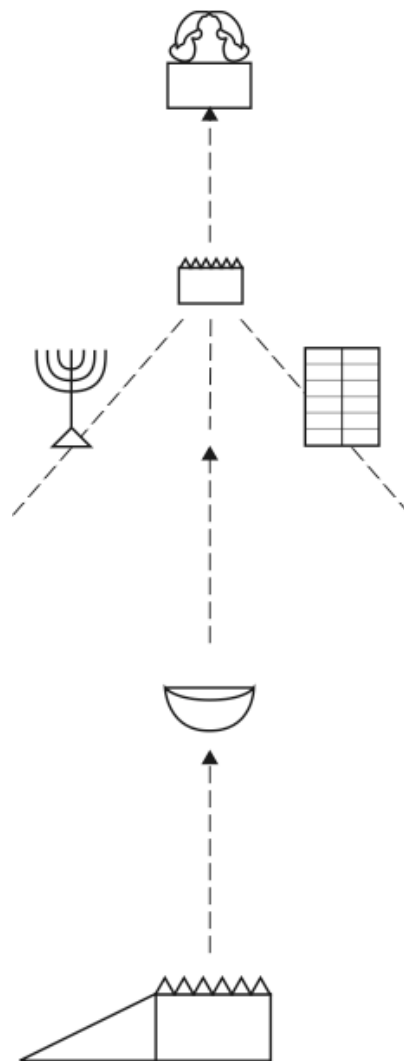
<sup>83</sup> *ibid*, 37

<sup>84</sup> See Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* for a thorough exploration of the Tabernacle as an architectural mnemonic, echoing the Sinai experience of revelation on a horizontal plane.



laver for washing, with the incense altar and finally with the Holy Ark at the pinnacle of the structure. The three vessels of the *kodesh* section form an open triangle around this spine consisting of the menorah, show-bread table and incense altar.

Altogether, the configuration of these vessels forms an arrow pointing toward the *kodesh kodashim*. As the space narrows, the vessels direct one ever more deeply into the interior space of supreme intimacy. A sense of entering a womb is created. See below.<sup>85</sup>



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<sup>85</sup> This drawing and all others, unless otherwise specified were created by the author with the technical assistance of Rose Tannenbaum.

The Tabernacle functioned within a hierarchical social structure of progressively limited access. Only one man, the High Priest had access to the innermost section of the Tabernacle, while ordinary Priests had access to the Holy section and courtyard. The *Levi'im* had access only to the courtyard and the Israelites had limited, if any, access to the Tabernacle courtyard. This division of space expressed a concept of increasing holiness through progressively restricted spaces. The Tabernacle format evolved into the architecture of the Temple, which maintained these social strata and the restrictive use of space, but allowed for community gathering places within the courtyard. The community was urged and invited into the realm of the sacred space, if only into the courtyard. This model of restrictive access to the sacred was incorporated into Early Synagogues and Churches through the design of a chancel screen, *soreg* or barrier, which separated the clerical leadership from the community.<sup>86</sup> Chancel screens were also used to demarcate the *bima*. Regarding the chancel screen, “Fine has suggested, it may have acquired the significance of dividing the more holy area of the synagogue hall (i.e., where the Torah scrolls were placed) from the less sacred space.”<sup>87</sup> Over time, the chancel area was eliminated in synagogues (though it still remains in many churches today) and the service was further democratized by placement of a central table for Torah reading and active participation in the service by the congregation.<sup>88</sup>

Moving toward a new model, that embraces the idea of a progressive approach toward *kedushah*, without the social overlay of political hierarchy and restricted access, I am proposing that we reclaim the wisdom of the *mishkan* architecture in a truly democratic form. By creating an environment that communicates *stages of approach* toward the

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<sup>86</sup> Branham, 375-394

<sup>87</sup> Levine, 342

<sup>88</sup> *ibid*, 380

sacred, that are open to all, we honor the sacred journey of each participant. Individuals are thereby afforded the opportunity to journey (metaphorically) along the path of the High Priest.<sup>89</sup> By understanding and utilizing the energetic wisdom of the architectural design of the Tabernacle, *we can reclaim* useful spiritual design concepts for use in sacred communities today.

The *mishkan* utilizes geometric relationships to communicate progressive stages of intimacy with the Divine. The geometry and scale of a modern sacred space can be similarly constructed to communicate this type of depth-orientation. The design of an anteroom or garden walk that leads one to the sanctuary can be useful in creating a sense of moving inward. The shape of the sanctuary, its scale, geometry, ceiling height and the placement of furniture, all possess the potential to influence a sense of growing intimacy. The design of the sanctuary should provide a sense of movement through progressive stages of connectivity.

There are many possible ways to achieve these goals through architecture and design. Creative architects and interior designers, once familiar with these intentions have a plethora of tools for achieving conceptual spaces. It is of prime importance, however to recognize the need for our sacred spaces to communicate safety, intimacy and the approach toward the holy, so as to function as facilitators of inner movement.

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<sup>89</sup> I thank Rabbi David Greenstein for helping me develop my thoughts on this aspect of the model I am proposing.

## Connecting To Others

As discussed earlier, a sacred space is one that connects the human being to a sense of the Divine. We encounter the Divine in many ways, but perhaps most important is through our relationships with one another. Buber writes, “In the beginning is the relation.”<sup>90</sup> He explains that by living in this consciousness of relatedness, one experiences intimations of the eternal. For, in the “relationships through which we live, the innate You is realized in the You we encounter.”<sup>91</sup> We become more fully human through relationship as we discover a deeper sense of the self through the other. In this dynamic process, the presence of spirit is revealed.

In our age of the techno-communication, opportunities for this kind of true encounter with others are rapidly falling away. We communicate all day long, but how often do we look directly into the eyes of another and listen deeply to the being before us? Our sacred spaces must, by definition, foster this kind of encounter in order to facilitate the development of sacred community. Buber explains, “True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too) but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another.”<sup>92</sup> We must replace narcissism with a consciousness of the Godly that exists in others and between one another, in a living reciprocity that disavows egocentrism.

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<sup>90</sup> Buber, 69

<sup>91</sup> *ibid*, 78

<sup>92</sup> *ibid*, 94

Our tradition draws a picture of precisely such relationships in the layout of the twelve tribal camps relative to the *mishkan*.<sup>93</sup> Each tribe is located in a particular orientation relative to the four cardinal directions, relative to each other and to the *mishkan* at the center. Like a flower with petals that radiate from a common source and support one another, or a solar system of unique entities that revolve around a common sun, this circular and interrelated organization speaks the language of interdependence and common focus.

It should be noted that this community model also included hierarchical delineations of leadership and power (*Kohanim, Levi'im, Yisraelim*) as described earlier and which was reflected in the encampment of the entire community. *Levi'im* camped inside the circle of the tribes, (closer to the Tabernacle) and Moses and Aaron camped inside of that boundary, closest to the entrance of the Tabernacle. While this model of restricted access conflicts with current concerns for inclusion and equal access, I am proposing that we consider the arrangement of the *twelve tribes* around a central point as a useful metaphor for sacred community. In such a model, access to the Divine is individually based and democratic in nature. The twelve tribes represent a community with a shared, central focus on Divinity. Each differs in perspective but nevertheless holds an equidistant position to the center. The image of the twelve tribes provides a physical model for expressing the values of pluralism.

The inner circle of the camp was reserved for the spiritual leadership and regularly reminded the people that they- the leadership retained greater access to the Divine than the ordinary folk. While we too acknowledge the need for spiritual leadership, it is important to determine the spatial language we choose to employ relative to that

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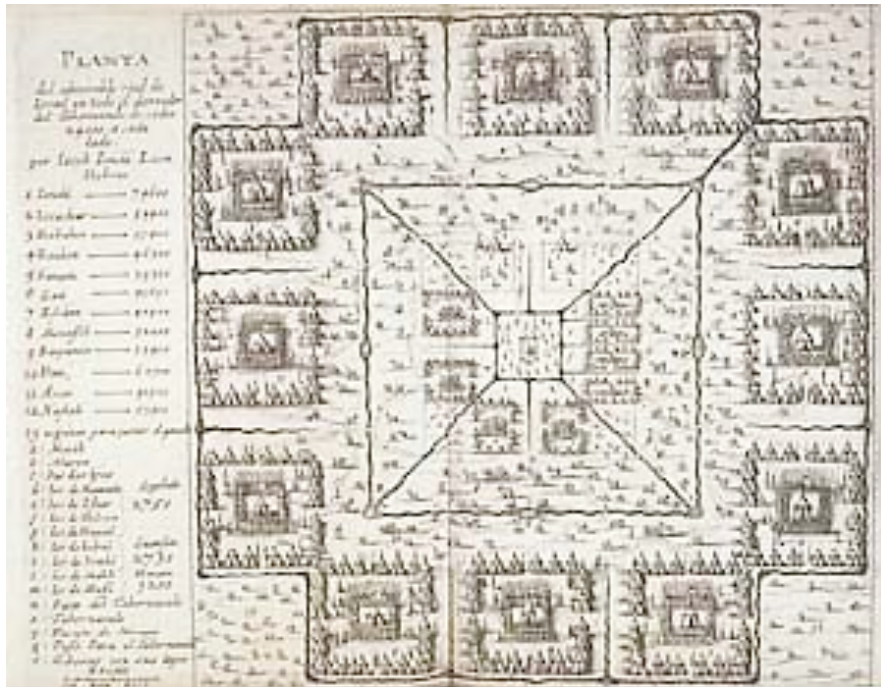
<sup>93</sup> See Numbers 2

leadership. Where the clergy sits and stands relative to the community conveys multiple messages regarding the community's concept of leadership, spiritual access and responsibility for spiritual work.

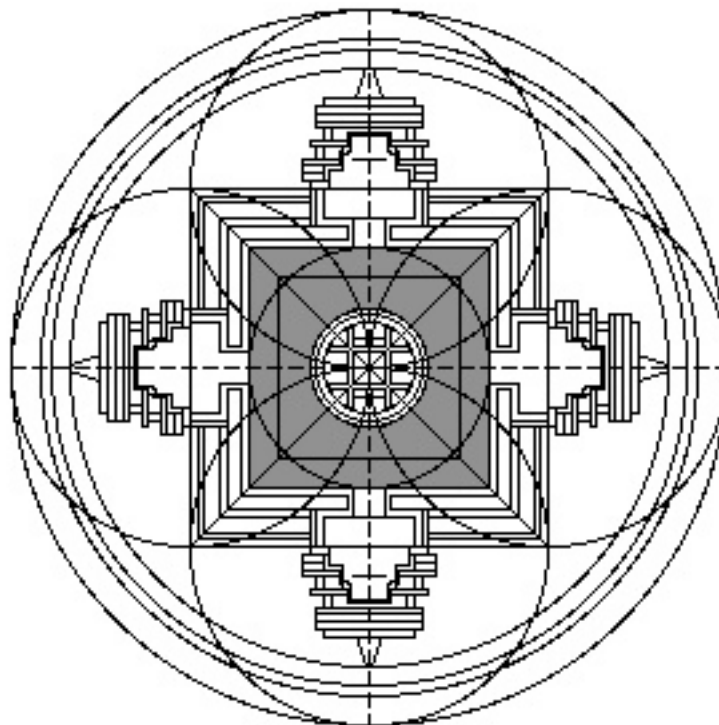
The four directions, within which the tribes must encamp and which surround the *mishkan*, can be understood as metaphors for different perspectives. While each member of the community holds a unique perspective, each is focused upon the same central point. Whether residing in the bright, hot light of the south or in the darker space of the north, each tribe is focused on the one sacred center and each is equidistant from that center. Sacred community begins with God at the center, with a shared focus on the Divine as the unifying point. All members are unique, yet all are interrelated, interdependent, necessary and equal in relationship to God. The image of the twelve tribes around the *mishkan* conveys multiplicity within a greater unity. The patterns of Tibetan mandalas (described earlier) also convey this sense of multiplicity within a cosmic unity.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Note also the pattern of the circle within the square, within the cosmic circle in the mandala. The four quadrants of the square refer to earth, within the cosmic unity of the circle.



Israelite Camp around the Mishkan drawn by Rabbi Jacob Judah Leon:Amsterdam, 1654<sup>95</sup>



Classic Tibetan Mandala Design<sup>96</sup>

<sup>95</sup> From website: mhs.ox.ac.uk

Roundness, the experience of a circular shape, communicates a sense of wholeness to the individual in relation to God and to the Self, and also in relation to community. In discussing the phenomenology of roundness, Bachelard states, “being is round” and “we live in the roundness of life.”<sup>97</sup> The Jewish practices of serving a round *challah* for the New Year and hard-boiled eggs for a mourner’s first meal, similarly affirm the *roundness of life*. These images have an effect upon us. They “ help us to collect ourselves, permit us to confer an initial constitution on ourselves and to confirm our being intimately, inside.”<sup>98</sup> From this place of the recognition of the wholeness of being, we can experience the *roundness* of community. Structures built in the round support our recognition of the roundness of being, the roundness of life and the round wholeness of community.

Roundness can also be created in fixed non-round spaces through flexible seating, walkways and floor coverings that delineate space. Vosko describes this type of seating plan in the round whereby the sight lines for every person “would draw the assembly into the liturgical event (at the center) and would be more conducive to active participation.”<sup>99</sup> In the round, a community is focused into itself rather outside of itself toward a distant point. Participation is enhanced outwardly as well as inwardly. The community experiences itself as a round, whole organism.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> From website: [digitalroam.typepad.com](http://digitalroam.typepad.com)

<sup>97</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 254

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*

<sup>99</sup> Vosko, *God’s House is Our House*, 59

<sup>100</sup> The circle-hoop is the primary symbol for Native American cultures. The Lakota arrange their round teepees in a circle echoing the circular universe. See Lawlor, 106.



## Connecting To The Earth

To me, every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,  
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,  
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same,  
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same;  
Every spear of grass- the frames, limbs, organs, of men and women,  
and all that concerns them, All these to me are unspeakable perfect miracles.  
-Walt Whitman

It is through the wonder of the natural world that we readily experience a sense of the Divine hand. The book of Psalms is replete with images of nature that bespeak the presence of God. The psalmist writes: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day to day they pour forth speech; night to night they communicate knowledge. There is no speech, there are no words, their voice is not heard. Yet their music carries throughout the earth, their words to the end of the world.*<sup>101</sup>

Whether through the miracle of daily sunrise or the perfection of a blade of grass, the physical world provides us with endless opportunities to encounter a sense of the Divine. In fact, our world exists in such a state of perfected balance that even God in the book of Genesis is compelled to acknowledge, “that all that He had made, look, it was very good.”<sup>102</sup>

Yet we live at a time when the very essence of perfected balance inherent in the natural world is threatened. The seduction of technology and the proliferation of virtual experiences are replacing authentic encounters. Our urban environments of concrete and glass create barriers to the experience of the natural world. Therefore, our prayer spaces

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<sup>101</sup> Psalms 19 as translated by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks in *The Koren Siddur*, 410.

<sup>102</sup> Gen. 1:31

should support and amplify our relationship with the natural world. Through choice and placement of materials, our sanctuaries become sacred spaces when they express the balance and harmony intrinsic to nature. The *mishkan* provides us with an example of how a man-made structure can echo in microcosmic fashion, the perfection of the created world.

Numerous *midrashic* sources as well as Philo and Josephus describe the microcosmic qualities of the *mishkan*. Philo writes “The highest, and in the truest sense the holy temple of God is, as we must believe, the whole universe, having for its sanctuary the most sacred part of all existence, even heaven...”<sup>103</sup> Similarly Josephus, in reference to the holy vessels records, “Every one of these objects is intended to recall and represent the universe, as he will find if he will but consent to examine them without prejudice and with understanding. Thus, to take the tabernacle, by dividing this into three parts and giving up two of them to the priests as a place approachable and open to all, Moses signifies the earth and the sea, since these too are accessible to all; but the third portion he reserved for God alone, because heaven also is inaccessible to men. Again by placing on the table the twelve loaves, he signifies that the year is divided into as many months.”<sup>104</sup>

Midrash Tadshe, a tenth century aggadic work attributed to the second century sage Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair states, “The *mishkan* was made to stand for His creation of the world. Two cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant to represent the two names of God: the Tetragrammaton and Elohim. The heavens, the earth and the seas are homes for the all creatures therein. For the upper heavens, eleven curtains were made for the tent of meeting and for the firmament, ten curtains of the tabernacle were made. To represent

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<sup>103</sup> Leibowitz, 485, quotes Philo from The Special Laws 1, p.137, Vol.VII, Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*, quoting from Antiquities III,7, Vol.IV, p.137, Loeb Classical Library.

earth, the pure Table was made and for the fruit of the earth they would arrange two loaves of bread in two columns of six apiece to represent the months of summer and winter. To represent the sea, a washbasin was made and for the heavenly lights (sun, moon and stars) a menorah was made.”<sup>105</sup>

The Zohar also attests to this concept stating, “everything that the Holy One blessed be He created in this world, was created on the pattern of the world above, and it was all delineated in the construction of the Tabernacle.”<sup>106</sup>

Modern scholars as well have been captivated by the relationship between the *mishkan* and God’s created universe. While avoiding representational metaphors as to the meaning of the vessels, Jewish thinkers such as Buber, Rosenzweig, Cassuto, Levenson<sup>107</sup> have discovered significant literary parallels in the texts of the creation story and the text describing the building of the *mishkan*.<sup>108</sup> Levinson in his volume *Sinai And Zion* describes the significance of the Temple in similar terms, stating, “the Temple is not a place in the world, but the world in essence. It is the theology of creation rendered in architecture and glyptic craftsmanship. In the Temple, God relates simultaneously to the entire cosmos, for the Temple (or mountain or city) is a microcosm of which the world itself is the macrocosm.”<sup>109</sup>

The Tabernacle and Temple provide a touchstone to the eternal, a reflection of the heavenly mirror. They connect the lower realms with the upper, the earth below with God

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<sup>105</sup> Midrash Tadshe, 15. as translated by Stern-Kaufman.

<sup>106</sup> Tishby, 910 quoting from the Zohar II, 220b-221a.

<sup>107</sup> See Levenson, 142-145 for a detailed discussion of the language parallels between God’s creating the world and the construction of the *mishkan*.

<sup>108</sup> See Leibowitz, 474- 482 for a complete illustration of the many literary relationships between the Genesis account of Creation: God’s making, finishing, seeing, and blessing and the Exodus account of making, finishing, seeing and blessing of the Tabernacle.

<sup>109</sup> Levenson, 139

above and they create a center that connects outward with the Godliness of all creation. These structures create a junction for the vertical axis to connect with the horizontal axis. All worlds connect and converge at this sacred node.

Sefer Ha-hinukh explains the purpose and value of such a structure to the consciousness of Man: The underlying purpose of this precept (Make me a dwelling place for Me to dwell in) ... know my son that God desires us to perform his commandments for no other reason than to promote our own well-being.... There is one passage in the Torah which outlines this principle: “Now O Israel, what does God require of thee, for thine own good” (Deut. 10:12-13) In other words He only requires you to perform his commandments because this is in your best interests. Note what follows: “Look the heaven and heaven of heavens are the Lord thy God’s, the earth and all that is therein.” In other words, He Himself does not need your performance. It was only His love for you that prompted Him to do you a good turn... Similarly, the building of a house in His name for us to perform therein acts of prayer and sacrifice was inspired by our needs, to put us in the right frame of mind to worship Him...”<sup>110</sup>

In bold terms the author states that the purpose of the structure is not to serve God’s needs, but rather to serve the people who enter therein to worship. A structure that communicates the balance and splendor of creation can assist us in entering into a frame of mind conducive to worship. It awakens us to the presence of God, both transcendent and immanent, and to our responsibility to care for this precious creation.

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<sup>110</sup> Sefer Ha-Hinukh, Mitzvah 95 as translated by Leibowitz, 482.

## The Elements

Universally, ancient peoples formulated an understanding of the metaphysics underlying the physical world based upon certain natural elements. Three, four and five-element systems have been proposed by various cultures and have served as the foundation for the development of complex systems of medicine, spirituality, architecture, astrology and other sciences pertaining to the body, time and space. The flourishing of the sciences and philosophy during Greek civilization incorporated the four elements of earth, air, water and fire as foundational concepts. Ancient Chinese civilization, which produced the compass, the medical art of acupuncture and a highly developed form of geomancy, relied upon a five-element system as the foundation of these sciences. These elements are water, wood, fire, earth and metal. Speaking in general terms, the four-element system was utilized primarily in the West, from Europe and throughout the Americas while the five-element system spread throughout much of Asia. Interestingly, the Jewish tradition, located at the nexus of east and west developed a three-element system: air, water and fire. The use of the three-element system, however, did not preclude incorporation of other systems, a subject we shall explore further on.

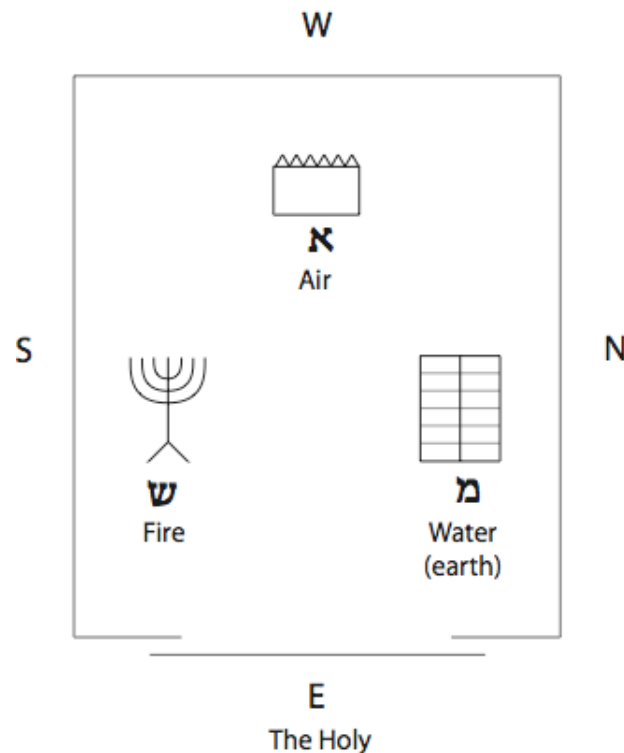
The *Sefer Yetsirah*, a mystical text that many scholars date to between the third and sixth centuries<sup>111</sup> but that Jewish tradition dates back to the *mishnaic* period or even to the time of Abraham states, “Three mothers, AMSh (Aleph, Mem, Shin) in the universe are air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire, earth was created from water, and air from breath decides between them.”<sup>112</sup> Further on in the text we read a similar statement, “Three mothers AMSh, air, water and fire. Fire is above, water is below, and air of

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<sup>111</sup> There is much scholarly debate as to the dating and authorship of this book. See Sholem, EJ, Vol 21, 328-331.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid*, 145

Breath is the rule that decides between them. And a sign of this thing is that fire supports water. Mem hums, Shin hisses, and Aleph is the breath of air that decides between them.”<sup>113</sup> Upon looking at the three vessels contained in the Holy section of the *mishkan*, we recognize the menorah as a vessel of fire located in the hot sun of the south and directly across from it in the cool north stood the table, with its accompanying vessels for water in addition to its bread.<sup>114</sup> The incense altar conveying air/breath, is located between them, in the west. Upon the *shulchan*, the presence of twelve loaves of bread corresponds to the idea that the element of water *gives rise* to earth. Fermentation is possible only through the presence of water. This image may also represent the concept cited above that earth was created from water. See image below.



<sup>113</sup> *ibid*, 243

<sup>114</sup> Exodus 25:29. Sarna notes that according to Bekhor Shor, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Torah commentator, the jars for the table were water containers for use in kneading the dough. We note also that bowls, ladles and jugs are all implements for liquid.

The Zohar develops this three-fold imagery of fire, water and air/spirit into an expression of the three *sephirot* of *hesed*, *gevurah* and *tiferet* and the nature of their relationships with one another.

“When it arose in the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, to create the world, He brought out a single flame from the spark of blackness, and blew spark upon spark. It darkened and was then kindled. And he brought out from the recesses of the deep, a single drop, and He joined them together, and with them He created the world. The flame ascended and was crowned on the left (*gevurah*), and the drop descended and was crowned on the right (*hesed*). They encountered one another and changed places, one on one side and one on the other. The one that descended went up and the one the ascended went down. They became intertwined and a perfect spirit (*tiferet*) emerged from them. The two sides were immediately made one and it (*tiferet*) was placed between them, and they were crowned with each other. Then there was peace above and peace below.”<sup>115</sup>

In both the Zohar and Sefer Yetsirah we discover an image of a three-fold universe in which a fundamental duality is brought into harmony by a third element.

The numerical presences of three, seven, and twelve also convey fundamental ideas about the nature of the universe. They are represented in the Holy section of the *mishkan* through the three pieces of furniture, the seven branches of the *menorah* and the twelve loaves of bread. Sefer Yetsirah states that from the Mothers emanated three Fathers and their descendants, the seven planets and their hosts and twelve diagonal boundaries.<sup>116</sup>

The numbers three, seven and twelve are given elaborate explanation and support as fundamental qualities of the universe in Sefer Yetsirah.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Midrash Tadshe offers the explanation that the seven branches of the *menorah* represent the seven planets and the twelve loaves represent the months of the year, a column of six for the summer

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<sup>115</sup> Tishby, 567-568 as quoted from Zohar I, 86b-87a

<sup>116</sup> SY, 231

<sup>117</sup> *ibid*, see Chapter 6, p.231-256 for a complete explanation and exploration of the significance of numbers three, seven and twelve to this cosmology.

months and six for the winter months.<sup>118</sup>

This type of symbolic construction, which analogizes metaphysical concepts of space and time, was prevalent in the ancient Near East and in India. Patai reviews several cross-cultural examples of this ubiquitous phenomenon in his classic volume, *Man and Temple*. He states, “In Vedic ritual, the sacred mound is the universe, the bottom of it is the earth, the top the sky, and the intervening part, the atmosphere. In Persia... Zoroaster first constructed among the hills... a natural cave... to the honor of Mithra, creator and father of all. The cave bore the likeness of the universe, which Mithra created, and the things inside according to their proportional distances bore symbols of the cosmic elements and regions...”<sup>119</sup> Patai gives numerous examples of structures that analogized the created world from the cultures of Egypt, Babylonia, and Rome as well as the designs of Byzantine Churches.

Having been immersed in the power of these cultural symbolisms, the Priest, upon entering the Holy section of the *mishkan* is likely to have been deeply affected. He would have experienced therein, a mini universe, expressing the fundamental nature of the world through the balance and harmony of the elements. In this place, time and space were analogized in an orderly universe.

Expanding our view outside of the Holy section to include the entire *mishkan*, we discover also the use of the four-element system. In the courtyard we find the copper altar in the east where the sacrifices are offered. More base and plentiful than gold and silver, copper was useful and practical. The flesh and blood offered at this altar give support for this station as representative of the earth element. Rashi states the copper altar was filled

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<sup>118</sup> Midrash Tadshe, 15

<sup>119</sup> Patai, 106



with earth in accordance with the earlier command (Ex. 20:21) to make an altar of earth.<sup>120</sup> This is the realm of doing, of physical action and bears a relationship to the concept of *assiyah*, in the theology of the Four Worlds.<sup>121</sup>

This theology emerges in mystical thought in the fourteenth century. As we shall see, this theory appears to be strongly related to the Tabernacle layout and its functions. One might surmise that the development of concepts related to the Four Worlds, were influenced in part by an esoteric understanding of the *mishkan* and the relationships of the four elements.

Proceeding forward to the next station, one encounters the copper washbasin containing water. This element is associated with the world of *yetsirah*- formation and the emotional body within the Four Worlds theology. In the Holy section and directly in line with the laver, sits the incense altar, which is clearly associated with the element of air. This element is connected with the world of *beriah*- creation and mental energies. The final station in direct alignment with the previous three stations is the golden *aron hakodesh*. Located in the Holy of Holies, this place is inaccessible to all but the High Priest who could only enter on one day each year- Yom Kippur. It is the place where

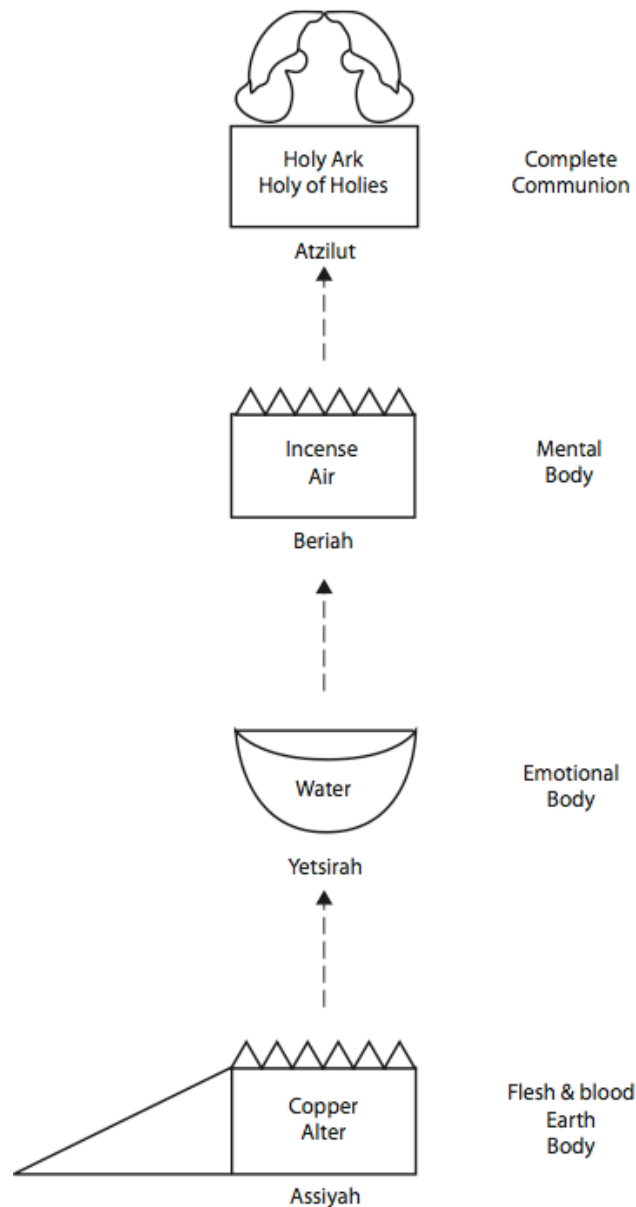
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<sup>120</sup> Rashi on Ex.27:5

<sup>121</sup> Green, 61-63.

The Four Worlds is a *kabbalistic* construct of the fourteenth century CE describing the process through which all possibilities come into being and become manifest by moving through four planes of existence. In descending order, the first world is called *atziluth* and refers to the plane of emanation in which the Ein Sof –the Infinite Divine is still united with its source. The second world is the plane of *beriah*, which describes the mental plane and the process of creation. The third world- *yetsirah* describes the plane of feelings and the process called formation. The fourth world - *assiyah* describes the plane of physical reality in which action is the primary mode of being. In a reverse order it also describes the path of the mystic back toward the One.

Moses experienced direct communication with God. It is beyond the physical realms of earth (flesh and blood), water and even air. It presages the realm of *atziluth*- emanation. In a four-element system, this station would be associated with the element of fire, for in this culture the presence of fire signifies the presence of God. The Divine Presence reveals itself through the burning bush, again at Sinai through the image of the fiery mountain and during the wilderness sojourn through the pillar of fire at night. (See image below.)



Levenson similarly describes this process of ascension and transformation from the physical world to one of essence as expressed through the structure and activities of the Temple. Given the Temple's structural parallels with the *mishkan*, we can apply the following statement to the Tabernacle as well. "The Temple and its rites, especially those of a purgative character, can be conceived as the means for spiritual ascent from the lower to the higher realms, from a position distant from God, to one in his very presence. The ascent of the Temple mount is a movement toward a higher degree of reality, one from the world as manifestation to the world as essence, the world as the palpable handiwork of God and his dominion."<sup>122</sup>

In addition to this central spine, the four elements make their appearance in two more configurations, in the positions of the four directions. The laver/water element in the east, the menorah/fire element in the south, the golden incense altar/air element in the west and table/earth element in the north. When linked together they form a small inner diamond shape.

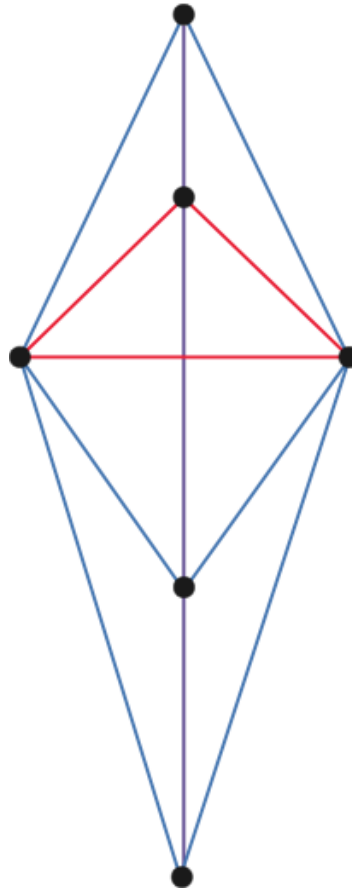
The third configuration of the four elements creates a larger outer diamond shape. The brazen/earth altar in the east, the menorah/fire element in south, the *Holy Ark*/fire element in the west and the table/water element in the north create an embracing unit of the four elements around the structure. (See diagram below)

It is of interest that the Table in the north appears to represent both earth and water elements. As mentioned earlier, according to mystical thought, described centuries later in the *Sefer Yetsirah*, earth is understood as a by-product of water.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Levenson, 142

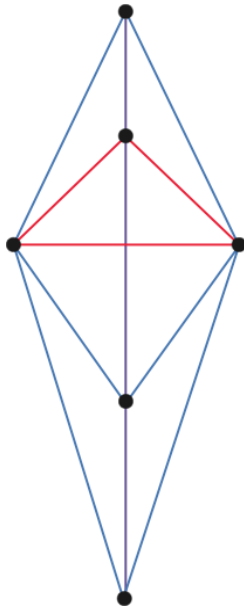
<sup>123</sup> Kaplan, 145



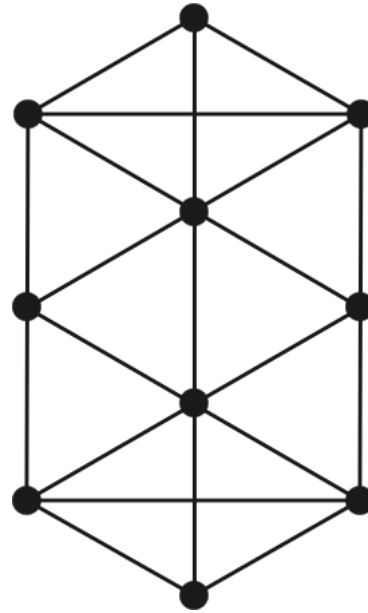
Relationships of the Four Elements  
 (as represented by the vessels and furniture) in the Tabernacle

Thus we see in the configuration of the vessels of the *mishkan*, four interlocking patterns of elemental design: a triangle of three elements at the center (in red), a central spine of the four elements (in purple), an inner diamond shape expressing the four elements again, and an outer diamond shape encompassing the entire structure (in blue) representing the four elements in the four cardinal directions. When these relationships are expressed graphically, we see the image of a jewel. This pattern may also have provided the prototype for the later kabbalistic development of the *sephirotic* pattern composing the *eitz chaim*, the tree of life.

Note the similar relationships of a central spine of four points with a pair flanking each side and connecting in the center.



The Tabernacle Floor Plan



The Ten Sephirot

Parsing the patterning of the elements a bit further, we notice a relationship between the numbers three and four. Three elements are presented within the structure, at the center of a four-element system. This 3:4 relationship can be understood through the analogy of musical rhythm. The 3:4 pattern creates a round rhythm, based on four cycles of three repeating beats. The listener does not experience a sense of beginning or end, but rather, a cyclical flow. In contrast, the 4:4 rhythm creates a four square experience of sound in which the beginning and end of each rhythmic cycle is clearly discernable. The endless and cyclical nature of the 3:4 rhythm evokes a sense of eternity. I propose that the use of the 3:4 relationships in the structural presentation of the elements in the

*mishkan* communicated a similar sense of cycles within cycles, the eternal roundness of life.

Modern worship spaces can incorporate this 3:4 relationship through architecture, décor and interior design of sanctuaries. The wooden synagogues of Poland provided one example of how this ratio can be expressed in décor. In these synagogues, three of the four walls were decorated according to one theme while the fourth, the one containing the *aron*, was set apart by unique stylistic qualities.

### **Contemporary Applications for Elemental Design**

A space that supports and enhances our relationship with the natural world supports and enhances our relationship with the Creator and promotes a sense of well-being. Whether we pause in awe at a clear night sky exploding with stars, or thrill at the sight of a crimson sun setting the sky ablaze, we are deeply affected on a soul level, by our world home despite our intellectual and technological advances. The elements speak to us through winding rivers, brilliant sun, sapphire blue skies, rolling grasslands and rugged mountains. We are deeply affected by our surroundings. Our tradition teaches us that by mirroring these natural relationships through intentional design we can create a truly sacred space, one that echoes the harmony of the natural world and resonates within us as a sense of well being.

## Fire

The fire element, as represented in the *mishkan* by the *menorah*, is represented in space by all forms of light and lighting. A room bathed in warm sunlight will convey a very different experience than a room with small, few or no windows. In creating a sacred space it is essential to utilize as much natural light as possible. Modern sanctuaries are frequently dark spaces requiring electric lights. Passive solar exposure should be maximized for light and warmth and ecologically responsible sources of electricity should be utilized. Solar energy would be an ideal choice for power. When artificial lighting is necessary, the use of bulbs that mimic the natural spectrum of light would be preferable.

Windows that allow for a view of nature should be emphasized and in urban environments where this may not be possible, skylights or specially placed windows that allow for at least some view of the sky would be beneficial. Alternatively, stained glass windows in red hues bring in a sense of fire. Color in general is a remarkable tool for expressing all of the elements. The fire element in particular can be expressed through warm tones of red, orange and purple. Jewish tradition considers the placement of windows to be one of the few halakhic considerations for a synagogue structure. The Shulchan Arukh specifies that a synagogue must have windows, preferably twelve.<sup>124</sup> As windows arguably represent different perspectives, the use of twelve appears to signify the community of Israel as recalled by the twelve tribes, each with their different perspectives in the camp.

Temperature of the space is another way in which the fire element is expressed. Many modern American sanctuaries are overly air-conditioned; creating a chilly space that is

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<sup>124</sup> SA OH 90:4

physically uncomfortable much of the year. Significantly moderating the use of air-conditioning would benefit the worshiper but perhaps more importantly would be environmentally responsible.

Shape also conveys the presence of the fire element. The pyramidal shape draws the eye upward to a peak resembling the shape of a flame. Thus a pyramidal shape can be utilized to convey the presence of the fire element. Whether at the peak of the structure such as we observed in the rooftops of the Wooden Synagogues of Poland or inside the structure through design motifs, this shape can support the presence of the fire element indicated by the *menorah*. One possible application might be to incorporate this shape into the design of the *aron*, for the *aron* contains the word of God and fire is associated with the presence of God in the Torah.<sup>125</sup>

According to Midrash Tadshe the seven branches of the *menorah* call to mind the seven planets. These celestial lights are mirrored in the seven earthly lights kindled in the Tabernacle. The movement of the planets symbolized the passage of time and as such, the seven days of the week derive their Greek and subsequent Latin names from the names of the seven planets.<sup>126</sup> By kindling seven lights, the seven heavenly spheres were brought down to earth (so to speak) and the passage of time through the cycle of seven was concretized. Utilizing the sequence of seven in the interior design of a sacred space would communicate our connection to the *menorah*, to the heavenly lights, the passage of time, the holiness of the seventh day and the element of fire. This could be accomplished through a variety of design features such as a series of seven lights/sconces on the walls,

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<sup>125</sup> The burning bush-Ex. 3:2, Mt. Sinai- Ex.19:18

<sup>126</sup> Monday/Lundi from Moon, Tuesday/Mardi from Mars, Wednesday/Mercredi from Mercury, Thursday/Jeudi from Jupiter, Friday/Vendredi from Venus, Saturday/Samedi from Saturn and Sunday/Dimanche from the Sun.



seven windows in a row, seven images within a stained glass window etc...

Placement of fire elements in the southern part of the structure would add another layer of resonance with the *mishkan*. As we have seen, the relationship of the four elements with the four directions was a universal concept and our use of this construct would add a quality of connectivity throughout the ages and across cultures to our sacred space.

The specific design suggestions presented here are applications of general principles and by no means meant to delimit the creativity of any community. These principles should be applied in ways that make environmental, social and cultural sense. Each community must find its own voice, based on its history, culture, and geography. A sacred space must be aesthetically relevant to each specific community, as it resonates with the foundational qualities of the elements.

## **Water**

It refreshes, cleanses, enlivens, relaxes, transforms and nourishes.

In the *mishkan*, the element of water resided in the copper wash- basin or laver situated to the west of the brazen altar and in front of the opening to the Holy section. Before entering into the Holy section of the *mishkan* the priest was obliged to wash at the laver in order to purify himself. From this time forward water has traditionally played a major role in the ritual life of the Jewish people.

Priests, obligated by strict purity laws utilized water to purify themselves on a regular basis during the Temple periods. The Temples contained many ritual baths/*miqvaot* for ritual purification. Many ancient *miqvaot* associated with Judean synagogues dating to

the late first century, have been uncovered through contemporary archaeological research. Each ancient *miqveh* has been generally situated near or next to the synagogue structure.<sup>127</sup> In addition to the presence of *miqvaot*, Josephus notes that it was the custom of Hellenistic Jewish communities to situate their synagogues near a body of water.<sup>128</sup> Levine cites archaeological evidence for this practice as was discovered in Egypt, Delos and Ostia. Furthermore he states, “The reason for this practice is not entirely clear, although one obvious possibility is the need to be close to water for purification purposes, a practice already attested in the *Letter of Aristeas*.”<sup>129</sup>

Ritual immersion was performed in order to return a person from a state of impurity to a state of purity. Every condition of ritual impurity was remedied through ritual immersion in water. Levine explains that the issue of water and its availability was an important concern for many Diaspora synagogues of Late Antiquity. “In matters of praying, eating and touching sacred scriptures, the cleanliness/purity of one’s hands was paramount.”<sup>130</sup> Archeological evidence from this period reveals that, “many synagogues had some sort of water facility in the courtyards or entranceways, either in the form of a cistern, a basin, a fountain or several of the above.”<sup>131</sup>

Water was understood to enable a transition or transformation from one condition to another. Water installations were discovered to be the most common feature in the atria of most ancient synagogues. The atrium was a transitional space that connected the street to the synagogue sanctuary. In this place of transition, from the mundane to the sacred, ancient synagogues commonly provided a water installation of some kind for ritual

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<sup>127</sup> Levine, 75

<sup>128</sup> Kaloun, 60

<sup>129</sup> Levine, 114

<sup>130</sup> *ibid*, 302

<sup>131</sup> *ibid*

cleansing. These installations varied from site to site and might consist of a natural cavity in the ground for water, a cistern, a fountain or a basin. Most frequently, a basin “was used for the washing of hands and feet and was placed in the middle of the courtyard (atrium) just outside the main entrance to the synagogue, or in the hall, or narthex, leading from the street into the synagogue sanctuary.”<sup>132</sup>

It is clear that these washbasins did not function as a *halakhic miqveh* but still provided for a symbolic act, to tune one’s consciousness to the shift into a sacred space. Levine cites a genizah fragment that offers an explanation for this practice. “Washing symbolizes the need to act in awe and holiness while in the synagogue, as was once the practice when entering the precincts of the Jerusalem Temple: ‘It is for this reason that our ancestors installed in all synagogue courtyards offering basins of fresh water for sanctifying the hands and feet.’”<sup>133</sup> Echoing the washbasin situated at the entrance of the Holy section of the Tabernacle, these ancient synagogues extended this purification practice to all attendees.

Today, the *miqveh* and ordinary water are still used by men and women to signal a transition. Traditional Jewish women use the *miqveh* after menstruation to mark the shift from menses to the condition of fertility. Traditional men utilize the *miqveh* to mark a shift from an ordinary day to Shabbat or a holiday, cleansing themselves of the previous activities of the work- week and entering into a new condition, ritually cleansed for the beginning of the holy day. Immersion in a *miqveh* is also an essential requirement for a traditional conversion to Judaism.

Ordinary water is also commonly used for ritual purification in other circumstances. It

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<sup>132</sup> *ibid*, 331

<sup>133</sup> *ibid*, 333 and as quoted from Margoliot, *Palestinian Halakhah*, 132.

is Jewish custom to ritually wash one's hands upon return from a cemetery in order to make the distinction between life and death and cleanse oneself after contact with the dead. Ritual washing upon rising from sleep is another traditional custom used to mark the transition from sleep (which is considered 1/60<sup>th</sup> of death) to wakefulness. The final ritual cleansing of the body takes place upon death through the ritual of *taharah*. *Taharah* or purification is performed in order to respectfully cleanse the dead (through immersion in water) of all the impurities of this life, in preparation for the final transition of the body and soul to their respective eternal homes.

It is unclear why most synagogues abandoned the use of water as a transition station before entering the sanctuary. It is noteworthy that this practice of placing water for washing in the atrium was prevalent in the Early Churches as well. Fountains for ablutions are still found today in the atria of Churches in Syria, Cyprus and Mt. Athos. However, over time, the washing stations disappeared as well, from the majority of Churches in the East and West.<sup>134</sup>

The concept of a transitional space, an atrium or foyer between sanctuary and the street remains a common feature in modern synagogues, but its purpose is often not clearly defined or delineated. It is frequently the case that people gather to socialize rather than attempt to make a conscious transition into a prayerful attitude. I would suggest that the re-introduction of some type of washing station in the transitional space would greatly enhance the possibility for a true shift in consciousness and attitude and would aid in the transition from the mundane to the sacred.

The presence of water, even if not for washing, provides a necessary link with the natural world and should be considered as a design feature. Water can be placed in the

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<sup>134</sup>Leclercq, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07433a.htm>

sanctuary itself in the form of a fountain. This type of installation also provides an auditory experience of movement and can add a dimension of grace and peace to a sacred space. Water installations might also be considered in the garden area of a sanctuary with access to this space directly from the sanctuary for the purpose of meditation.

The qualities of the water element can also be evoked in a sacred space through the use of reflective materials, glass and amorphous shapes.

### **Earth**

The fundamental qualities of earth are nourishment and support. It is in this sense that both the Brazen Altar and the Table of Showbread were associated with the element of earth. One of the primary functions of a sacred space is to provide a nexus point for the meeting of worlds. Through the sacrificial altars and the loaves of bread, the relationship between God and the people was acknowledged and both were nourished. The loaves of bread remained on the table for a week and were eventually eaten by the priests. Thus, the act of dedicating a “table for God”, of sanctifying food as holy, resulted in the physical nourishment of people. The cycle repeats itself week after week, whereby the food dedicated to God is returned to the people. It is a cycle of giving and receiving, a fundamental quality of the rhythm of life.

The Zohar discusses this relationship in metaphysical terms. It begins with a the question of whether the bread or the table is superior to the other, and answers emphatically, that “The table is the main thing. It is arranged in order to receive celestial blessings and nourishment for the world. And from the mystery of this table nourishment goes out into the world, just as it was bestowed upon it from above. And the bread is the

fruit and the food that go out from this table, in order to show that from this table fruit and green shoots and food go out into the world.”<sup>135</sup>

Based on this understanding we can incorporate the element of earth and the benevolence of giving and receiving, by establishing a location within the synagogue for the collection and distribution of food to the needy. Many synagogues already have collection areas and these are a blessing to their communities. But for those that do not yet have a dedicated space or who do only periodic collections, serious consideration should be afforded to creating a fixed place for continual collection and distribution. Creating a soup kitchen, supporting a local food bank or creating a food bank on the premises would bring mutual blessings to all involved.

Communal pot –luck meals are another way to establish God’s Table in our synagogues. The act of cooking for one another and sharing food builds community in a powerful way. As we nourish others, so too are we nourished.

Regarding design, the earth element can be introduced through the square shape. As discussed earlier, the circle in the square conveys the image of heaven on earth. This motif can be incorporated in a myriad of ways from shape of room, to floor decoration, furniture, fabric designs, and artwork.

Materials that communicate the earth element are ceramic tile, sand and stone. Colors that communicate earth are varied and move from hues of yellow to rust and browns, and terracotta to peach and pink. Introducing these colors or materials to a space will convey a sense of groundedness, solidity and support.

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<sup>135</sup> Tishby, 914 as quoted from Zohar II 154a-155b

## Air

The air we breathe connects us with all other breathing beings. We connect to the trees, to other mammals and to one another through breath. Air is, in a sense, the connective tissue of the world. The Sefer Yetsirah describes air as the peacemaker between fire and water, and the link between heaven and earth. In the body, our airways are situated between the nerve-sense center of the head and the metabolic region of the torso. The rhythm of breathing nourishes the entire body, connecting all parts through the oxygen it delivers while connecting us with our surrounding world. Air/oxygen cleanses and is restorative.

In the creation of a sacred space, it is essential to consider the quality of the air. Is there adequate ventilation? Does the air move? “In nature, the air is constantly moving and being regenerated and it is important to recreate this refreshing aspect of nature”<sup>136</sup> within all of our spaces. Air should flow gently in a space. There is nothing more stifling to the flow of one’s own creativity and energy than spending excessive time in a stuffy space with stagnant air. Kamal Meattle, a researcher in India discovered that three plants, the Areca Palm, Mother-in-Law’s Tongue and the Money Plant are the most effective indoor plants for increasing oxygen, removing CO<sub>2</sub>, formaldehyde and other volatile organic compounds from a closed environment.<sup>137</sup> Use of plants within urban synagogues may be an important consideration regarding the improvement of air quality.

Air is silent. The Sefer Yetsirah connects air with the silent letter Aleph, whose structure expresses a balance between one arm reaching upward and the contralateral leg reaching downward. “Mem hums, Shin hisses and Aleph is the breath of air deciding

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<sup>136</sup> Linn, 146

<sup>137</sup> <http://greenupgrader.com/6600/green-plants-for-fresh-air/> The latin names for these plants are *chrysalidocarpus lutescens*, *Sansevieria trifasciata*, and *epipremnum aureum*.

between them.”<sup>138</sup> We share the air we breathe as it flows in and out of all of us. It is a mediator of sorts between all of us and deserves attention in our building designs.

Air carries scent and scent nourishes the soul.

“Rabbi Abba was on a journey and Rabbi Isaac was with him. As they were going along they came across some roses. Rabbi Abba picked one and went on his way... Rabbi Abba smelled the rose. He said: It is scent alone that sustains the world, for we have seen that the soul survives only through scent. It is for this reason that (we smell) myrtle as the Sabbath departs.”<sup>139</sup> Beautiful scent produces pleasure and this is of value to the soul.

The incense of the Tabernacle was an offering of scent through the medium of air. The incense was burned and produced large amounts of scented smoke. Situated at the apex of the Holy section, between the *Menorah* and the Table, the incense altar created a link through air between the distinct forces of *gevurah* and *hesed* while also producing a link between heaven and earth. The Zohar states “Incense forges links, produces light and removes impurity.”<sup>140</sup> Scent is capable of cleansing a space. Scent refreshes and is restorative. Scent brings our awareness to the element of air.

We might consider introducing scent into the air of a sacred space. Today, a myriad of pure botanical oils are available in the marketplace. These oils are derived from trees, flowers, fruits and plants. Used medicinally since antiquity, each scent has certain physical properties that act on the body, mind, and soul. These oils can be dispensed through wooden wicks that require no fire and are thus usable on Shabbat and holidays. Additionally, since smoke is an irritant to people with breathing challenges, this simple

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<sup>138</sup> Kaplan, 95 from Sefer Yetsirah 2:1

<sup>139</sup> Tishby, 930 as quoted from Zohar II 20a. We smell the sweet scent of the myrtle to comfort the soul as the Shabbat departs.

<sup>140</sup> *ibid*, 936 as quoted from Zohar II 218b-219b



technology is a friendly alternative. Essential oils like lemon or orange can be diffused to refresh the sanctuary. Different scents can be diffused for different days, expressing a particular desired quality. For example, lavender and chamomile are known to produce a relaxing effect on the body and might be used before a Shabbat evening service. Tree oils such as cypress or pine (found in Israel) would add a special atmosphere to a *tu b'shvat* service.

In an urban environment, where the scents in the street are often unpleasant, the introduction of natural botanical scents to a sacred space can be especially restorative. The opportunity to inhale the essence of oak, juniper, rose or jasmine heightens our awareness of the beauty of the physical world, while providing a deep sense of pleasure. Scent creates a bridge to the natural world, awakening us to the gifts of the earth. Pleasure through scent is a pathway for experiencing the Divine.

## Materials

We experience a sense of well-being in a balanced environment where all the elements of the created world are represented in proper relationship. We feel a certain peace at the seashore, where sand and sea meet under blue sky and bright sun. In such a place, earth, water, air and fire coexist in harmonious relationships. Certain natural environments can also evoke a sense of awe, inspiration and connection with the Divine through their breathtaking beauty or simplicity. An interior space is capable of transmitting such qualities through an environment whose features echo the natural world. The presence of natural materials such as water, wood, stone, ceramic and metal as well as natural fabrics, in proper proportion can communicate the qualities of the natural world. Such a space honors creation.

D. Foy Christopherson, a congregational consultant in the Evangelical Lutheran Church explores the subject of authenticity in sacred space. He writes, “Space that honors creation is a space that is genuine and authentic, not synthetic or pretending to be something it is not. It is made of materials that are God-grown, from the abundance of creation, respectfully used and that are beautiful and well crafted... In the worship space, beauty is a portal to the mystery of God... Beauty is revealed through the honest use of the materials of God’s creation”<sup>141</sup> Authenticity of materials is of prime importance in creating a sacred space. It communicates integrity, honesty as well as natural beauty. Therefore, we should avoid using materials that pretend to be something they are not. Examples would include silk flowers, wood laminate and plastic masquerading as metal or ceramic. An important distinction should be made between the artistic and playful use

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<sup>141</sup> Christopherson, 50, explores in greater detail the principles laid out by Renewing Worship Initiative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, specifically twenty-five principles for worship space.

of trompe l'oeil<sup>142</sup> to convey artistic expression and the substitution of artificial materials for natural ones.

### **Connecting With God**

Thus far, we have explored design options that communicate methods for connecting with God through the Deep Self, through relationships in Community and through the Environment/Earth. We turn now to an exploration of relationship with God as a distinct entity, both immanent and transcendent. Torah describes a transcendent God who commands Moses to instruct the people to build the Tabernacle such that his Presence may dwell among the people. “Have them make me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them.” This verse from Exodus 25:8 appears to say that the purpose of the Tabernacle is to create a place for the indwelling of God among the people. The transcendent God who had as yet only become accessible to the people through the overwhelming experience of Sinai commands the people to build a space as a channel for His immanent presence. However, the text does not explicitly reveal why God initiates this new form of relationship. The medieval commentators Rashi and Nachmanides each take a different view as to God’s ultimate motivation for the construction of the Tabernacle. Their debate echoes and further elucidates the ancient debate between the schools of Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva regarding the timing of the Tabernacle decrees relative to the sin of the

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<sup>142</sup> A painting technique that creates an optical illusion and may mimic natural substances such as wood, water, stone and/or metal.

golden calf.<sup>143</sup>

Rashi contends that the building of a *mishkan* became a necessity only after the sin of the golden calf. Although the descriptions of this building project are presented in the Torah prior to the narrative of the golden calf, Rashi resolves this difficulty by quoting the rabbinic principle established by the school of Rabbi Ishmael “there is no order of precedence or succession in the Torah.”<sup>144</sup> Events in the Torah are not necessarily presented in chronological order. With that premise, Rashi proposes that God never intended for the people to worship Him through sacrificial service in the *mishkan* or even at the Temple in Jerusalem. Rather, God intended for each person to experience the presence of the *Shekhinah* directly, personally, as occurred at Mt. Sinai. There was to be no need for prescribed actions in a designated location. However, the sin of the golden calf expressed a human need to have a physical expression for a relationship with this divine non-physical being. The people were not able to make the paradigm leap from the concretized images of the divine in Egypt to this disembodied God of Heaven who turns nature upside down at will. Therefore, Rashi explains, God responded to their need by initiating the creation of a designated space with a prescribed service that would allow the people to express their spiritual needs. Both the service and the structure would provide form in the midst of the wilderness, order in the midst of chaos. Maimonides takes up this line of thought by asserting that the people had become habituated to animal sacrifice. God recognizes this and provides a vehicle for the people to redirect their need for sacrificial service toward God rather than towards idolatry. Maimonides states, “Here,

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<sup>143</sup> Heschel, 76-82

<sup>144</sup> Rashi utilizes this principle on several occasions in his commentary to explain why certain events in Torah are presented non-chronologically. For other examples see Gen 6:3, Ex 4:20, Lev 8:2, Num 1:1. This principle was originally expounded by Rabbi Judah ben Shalom a fifth cent. Amora. See Tanhuma Terumah 8, Tissa 31, Pikudei 2

God led the people about, away from the direct road which He originally intended, because he feared they might meet on the way with hardships too great for their ordinary strength; He took them by another road in order to obtain thereby His original object... to spread a knowledge of Him and cause them to reject idolatry.”<sup>145</sup> Following the sin of the golden calf, God redresses his original plan in order to accommodate for human weakness and the desire for animal sacrifice. The Tabernacle and Temple will serve this need while directing the people to the recognition of the One God.

Contrary to Rashi and Maimonides, Nachmanides argues that the essence of the Tabernacle was to create a place for the *Shekhinah* to dwell so that the relationship that had been established between the people and God at Mt. Sinai could continue to be manifested. The presence of the Tabernacle within the Israelite camp was intended to literally bring down to earth a continuity of revelation and relationship experienced first on Mt. Sinai. The Tabernacle was meant to deepen the relationship between God and the people and should not be viewed as a remedy for spiritual failure and addiction to animal sacrifice. Cassuto states similarly, “The nexus between Israel and the Tabernacle is a perpetual extension of the bond that was forged at Sinai between the people and their God. The children of Israel, dwelling in tribal order at every encampment, are able to see, from every side, the Tabernacle standing in the midst of their camp, and the visible presence of the sanctuary proves to them just as the glory of the Lord dwelt on Mt. Sinai, so he dwells in their midst wherever they wander in the wilderness.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore, the directives for building the Tabernacle are given immediately after the revelation at Sinai . Douglas’ assertion, discussed earlier, that the Tabernacle was structured on the plan of

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<sup>145</sup> Maimonides, 540

<sup>146</sup> Cassuto, 319

Sinai in a horizontal orientation, to serve as a visual mnemonic of the Sinai experience is consistent with this view as well.

Both Rashi and Nachmanides express important spiritual principles. Rashi and Maimonides express the idea that organized, dedicated service to God can remedy the human tendency to fall into misguided forms of worship. Viewed through today's lens, we might say that the establishment of a sacred community serves to temper and balance the ego's need for self-aggrandizement. It stands as a buffer to the very human tendency to feed the ego and elevate wealth and power as supreme objectives. A sacred community functions as a grounding anchor, reminding us of our place in the web of life, in the society we wish to create and of our relationship with our Creator. Like the Israelite encampment around the Tabernacle, a sacred community puts God at the center, because as Rashi claims, from a practical point of view we simply need to.

Nachmanides, on the other hand, presents a more exalted view of the function of the Tabernacle and the people's relationship with God. He views the *mishkan* as a magnet for attracting the presence of God and maintaining that relationship within the Israelite community. Sinai, the peak revelatory experience between God and his people took place once in the life of the nation. The Tabernacle expresses an ongoing, portable relationship with an immanent God. It requires and demands dedication and maintenance by the people. Through the manipulation of the mundane world into sacred space, a channel for the indwelling of the Divine is created.

Both Rashi and Nachmanides express necessary functions for sacred space: grounding anchor for the ego and inviting channel for the presence of God. I suggest that these goals are not mutually exclusive but rather, interdependent. As we build new worship spaces to welcome the presence of the Holy, it is incumbent upon us to maintain a check on the

ego. The principles discussed earlier in this paper support these same goals. Weaving into our designs the concern for inner work, community needs, and the honoring of Creation, we create both a grounding anchor for the ego and an inviting channel for the presence of the Divine to dwell among us.

In this world of dualities (Self and Other, vertical and horizontal, immanence and transcendence) the *mishkan* addresses the ultimate mystery of communion with God through the representation of the Holy Ark, crowned by the two cherubim in the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies. The Presence of God manifests and communicates in the space between the cherubim. According to Rabbeinu Bahya, the use of the term *shenayim* rather than *shenei* regarding the two cherubim implies a sense of differentness. “*Shenei* would have expressed identity, sameness; *shenayim* expresses differentness. The two cherubim are therefore to be imagined as male and female.”<sup>147</sup> Communion takes place in the space that is created between these two individualities through the vehicle of communication. The duality implicit in the physical world and represented by the two cherubim is bridged through relationship, through sacred communication.

The cherubim are associated with the elements of fire and wind, that which is evanescent, flickering and dynamic. Zornberg explains, “The electric tension of speech and silence, of expression and listening to the Other, is what animates the vacant core of the Mishkan, in the midst of fire. Such dialogue between two who are irrevocably different requires sacrifice, an ability to live without the total consummation of desire.”<sup>148</sup> One does not consume the Other in the interest of self-expression. Rather, each holds open a place to the Other. In such a space, the Divine may enter and truth- *Emet* is

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<sup>147</sup> Zornberg, 340

<sup>148</sup> *ibid*, 343

revealed.

A sacred space allows for the tension of opposites to exist in dynamic and loving relationship. Moreover, it facilitates such encounters. Such a place communicates a culture of inclusion but not sameness. It encourages deep listening and creates the safety for honest sharing.

The place between is the empty space, an opening between the worlds bounded only by a loving relationship. It is formless but felt.

It is the heart space. “My beloved to me is a bag of myrrh lodged between my breasts (Song of Songs 1:13) - this is the Shekhinah abiding between the two Cherubim.”<sup>149</sup>

Perhaps we can analogize this bounded space into two pillars, or two chairs facing one another; but in truth, it is the culture of the community that determines such a space. A culture such as this creates a *maqom*, a sanctified place to experience the holiness of Self and Other and the immanence/transcendence of Divinity- a nexus for meeting in the roundness of life.

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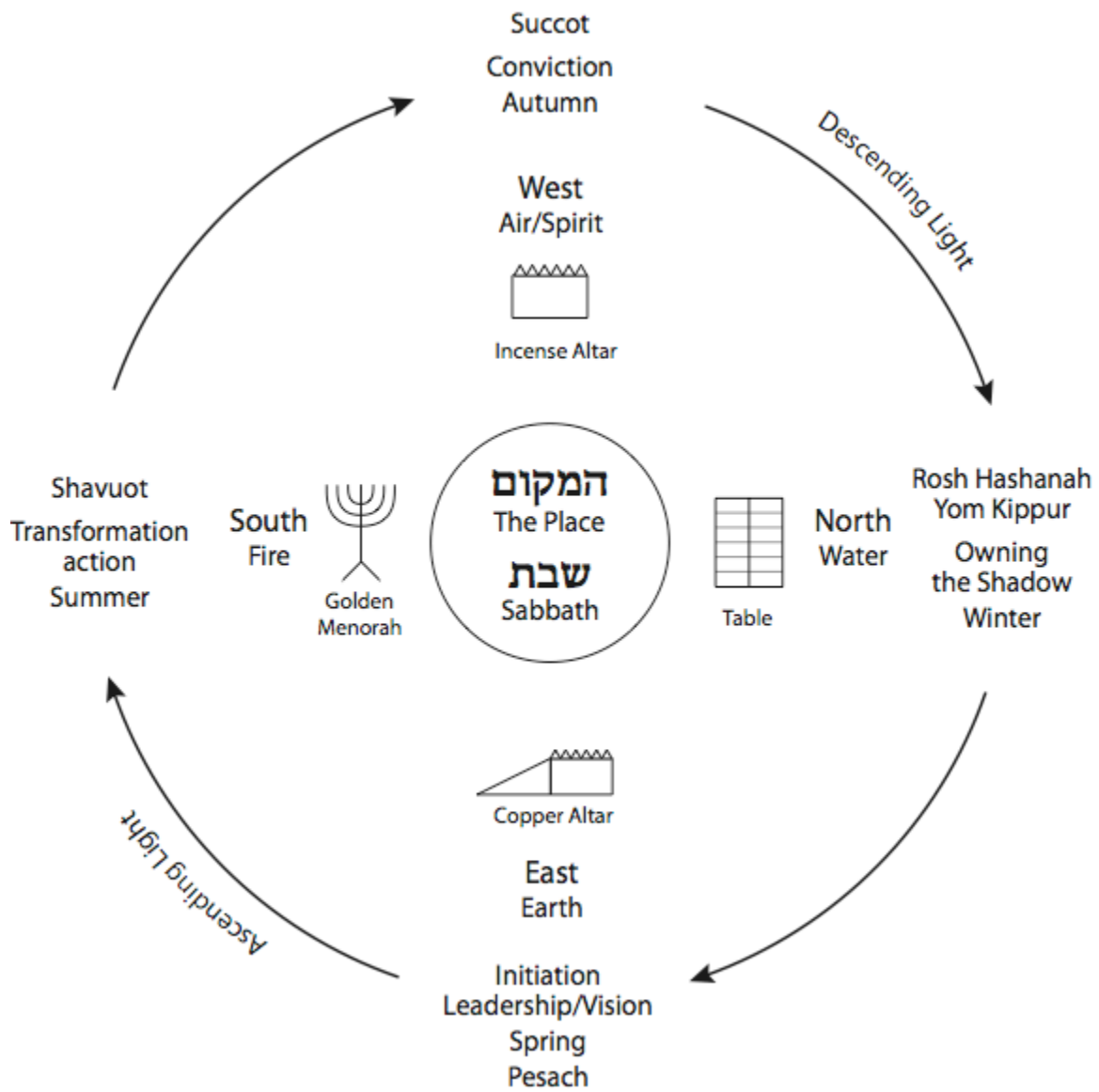
<sup>149</sup> Heschel, 98 as quoted from Song of Songs Zuta 1:13.



## Appendix

The following subjects are beyond the scope of this paper but will be included in this project at a later date.

- ❖ Colors: Crimson, Blue and Purple and their relationship to the three-fold nature of Creation: AMSh; Fire-Water-Air; Heaven-Earth- Sea; Gevurah-Hesed-Tiferet; Expansion-Contraction -Synthesis/Harmony
- ❖ The Tabernacle as a macrocosm of the human body including the sense organs. Engaging all of the senses.
- ❖ Comparison of the Tabernacle with other sacred shrines in the Ancient Near East
- ❖ Space and Time: See final drawing. How the seasons and *chagim*/holidays fit into the template for the *mishkan*, the four directions, and thematically connect to the layout of the Israelite camp around the Tabernacle. A multi-layered template expressing a possible Ancient Israelite understanding of space and time.



*A Model of Sacred Space and Time*

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68:10

68:9

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p. 15

*Midrash Tanhuma*

Terumah: 8

Tissa:31

Pikudei:2

*Mishnah Avot*

1:2

*Mishneh Torah*

Hilchot Tefilah 11:1-3

Hilchot Tefilah 11:5

Hilchot B'rachot 1:10-11

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*Shulkhan Arukh*

OH 90:4

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Pesachim 88a

Rosh Hashanah 29a