

Free research paper on synagogues

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1. Introduction

Synagogues are an essential part of the Jewish community both in Israel and various parts of the world in which this people are dispersed. Specifically, the synagogues are a core component of the lives of Jewish people who subscribe to the Judaism and Chasidim faith. The synagogues have been an integral part of the Jewish community ever since their exile years in Babylon. The basic ideology that motivated the exiled members of the Jewish community to set up synagogues was their inability to access the Temple of Jerusalem which prior to their exile in Babylon had been their primary house of worship. In fact, the Babylonians tore down the Temple of Jerusalem during their invasion of the city therefore even the few remnants could not worship in the temple. Synagogues were retained even after the Jewish people returned from exile and rebuilt the Temple of Jerusalem as gathering places and centre for indoctrination into Judaism. The consequent invasion by the Romans and the resultant dispersal of the Jewish people led to the dispersal of synagogues to different parts of the world. Ever since, the concept of synagogues has been passed down from generation to generation of Jewish communities.

The role played by the synagogue as a house of worship in the Jewish community is secondary in nature. This is partly because of two reasons; the first being that the primary role of synagogues in any Jewish community is for social gathering purposes. The second reason for this is that Jews believe in the worship of the heart which they commonly refer to as the concept of *avodah sh'belev* and therefore conduct most of their primary worship activities in their respective households and homes. In fact religious

practices such as Lighting Shabbat candles, saying Kiddush, and sharing challah are a central part of family life. This begs the question, what social purpose do synagogues play in Jewish communities. First and foremost, synagogues act as a unification point for most members of the Jewish society. In fact this is one of the key reasons why the Jews are a very close knit society despite the fact that they greatly dispersed across the globe. Synagogues give the Jewish that rare opportunity to interact and engage among others communally. As a result of this, most of the prayers conducted by the Jews in synagogues are in the third rather than the first person as is the case in other religions Christianity included. The Jewish use make a lot reference to the word “ We” rather than “ I”.

Third, the synagogue worship services offer the Jewish community the rare opportunity of being involved constructively in each others lives. According to Jewish doctrinal and theological teachings, the synagogue is supposed to be a house of solace. This means that the troubled members of the Jewish community are welcomed with open arms in synagogues. Specifically, synagogues give the Jews an opportunity to support, pray and bless one another. Singing is a crucial component of a synagogue worship service in any part of the world. This aspect is strategically important given that it not only restores order to the otherwise chaotic day to day lives of congregants but also it also connects the congregants to their tradition thereby rejuvenating them. As such, it is clear that synagogues are a central part of the Jewish community all over the world. Based on this premise, the scope of this paper shall therefore include background information, design and the services that take place in the synagogue.

2. Background Information

The term synagogue is coined from a Greek terminology that loosely translated to English means the “ the meeting point.” However, Jews, the race of people in the world who partake their religious beliefs in synagogue prefer to use two terms; shul and beit k’nesset. Of the two, the latter is commonly used than the former. The origin of synagogues as places of worship in the Jewish mythology can be traced back to the years in exile in Babylon. Jews came with synagogues because they could no longer worship their God in the temple Jerusalem which was constructed solely for such purposes. Therefore, when the Jews finally returned from exile in Babylon, synagogues still took a central part in their religious even after the Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. In fact, synagogues became centers for not only socialization but also places of teaching the Jews on their theological ideologies. Even for Jews who remained in exile, the synagogue became their main house of worship a practice that has been upheld fervently up to the present age.

In fact even the architectural design of the synagogue reinforces this assertion. However, it must be mentioned that through out time, the religious practices conducted in the synagogue have undergone some changes to include the following. Jews in the present age interpret the synagogue as the house of prayer or simple put in Hebrew the Beit Teffi lah. As result, the Jews conduct their Shabbat within the precincts of the synagogue where people are given the opportunity not to learn about the religious doctrines of Judaism but also to worship their God. Secondly, Jews also due view the synagogue as a house of study and they commonly refer

to as Beit Midrash in their native dialect. As a result of these, it is a common practice to find theological schools within the synagogues whose sole purpose is to impart the religious doctrines of the community to people of different categories ranging from children to men. Finally, the synagogue as it is known today is also a house of social gathering and meeting or simply put Beit K'nesset. This implies that people of Jewish origin can meet together in such place for social functions that range from ordination of children to weddings. It is as a result of this perspective of the synagogue that Jews refer to as a place of safety and security especially during turmoil of any sort

3. Design of the Synagogue

The design of the synagogue is categorical in nature as it is the same with the design of houses of worship for other religion. This is based on the basic principle that the architectural design of the synagogue does indeed represent vital aspects of the Jewish religious beliefs. One of the most important architectural designs of a synagogue is the fact that one of its ends must face Jerusalem, which is the holy city in the Jewish mythology. Secondly, at the one end of the synagogue (the end facing Jerusalem), there is a box like structure called the ark. The sole purpose of the ark is to act as the storage room for the Torah scrolls. These scrolls are important because they do contain teachings in the Jewish religious beliefs. In addition to this, during the worship service, the congregation in the synagogue must face the ark. The essence of this practice is not only to pay tribute to the Holy of Holies from the temple in Jerusalem but to also act as a reminder to the new generations of their true roots and identity. This is a similar practice in the

Moslem religion whereby Muslims are required to face the holy city of Mecca during their many prayers.

In addition to the above mentioned architectural designs, the ner tamid or simply “ the everlasting light” should always hang in front of the ark. There is also a reading desk which can either be located in front of the ark or in the middle of the synagogue on a raised platform that is referred to as the bimah. Unlike ordinary churches, synagogues do not have representations of God either in the form of images, statues or icons. The fundamental principle behind this important architectural design is that Jews believe that having any form representation of God in their house of worship is a contravention of the Mosaic laws that are summed up in the Ten Commandments. This has brought up a very important aspect of synagogues and Jewish life in general; the Ten Commandments. The only form of representation that finds its way into the synagogue on very rare occasions is the religious motifs. These are depictions of the lions. As such, it is important to point out the significance of the lions as far as Jewish religious beliefs are concerned. The lions are the tribal symbol of the tribe Judah from which the religion of Judaism and the Jewish concepts were born.

The Jewish doctrines and ideologies are largely based on the Mosaic laws and the Ten Commandments. As a result, there is an architectural design accommodation for the Ten Commandments in the synagogue. Just like everything of utmost significance in the synagogue, the Ten Commandments are kept very close to the ark or on a seven-branched candle-stick that is commonly referred to as the menorah. Given that the synagogue is a house of worship; its precepts are normally treated with a lot of reverence. In fact,

it is the duty of the worshippers to keep clean and tidy at all times which reaffirm the old adage that cleanliness is next to godliness.

The basic ideology that stimulated the growth of synagogues within the Jewish communities historically and in the present age was to impart Jewish doctrines upon this society. As such, the main aspect of worship that takes place in synagogues is the reading of the Torah and this has been the case for the last 2, 000 years. Due to this, it is important to have a brief overview of the famous Torah scrolls. The Torah scrolls are not your ordinary scrolls and again point to the ability of the Jewish people to preserve most aspects of their history. In fact, these scrolls “ are made of a special parchment, written with a special quill and covered with ornate velvet or silk fabric”. The ornate covering of the scrolls is strategic and acts as a stark reminder of the ornate robes that priests used to wear while conducting services in the temple of Jerusalem.

Services in the temple are based on specific parts of the Torah that must be complimented by provision of the law. Based on this, it also emerges clearly that aspects of clothing inside the synagogue are not only an important of its structural design but also core part of the Jewish community. During worship services in the synagogue, men must wear a skull cap which is commonly referred to either as a yarmulke or kippah and prayer shawl or simply put the tallit. However during the morning worship sessions, men must specifically wear leather boxes and straps that are normally referred to as the tefillin a practice that is fervently followed as stipulated in Exodus 13: 9. It must be mentioned that tefillin are not on Shabbat. The skull cap on the other hand is worn by Jewish men in recognition of the fact that their God is above. In fact

it is a common occurrence to see a Jewish man in the skull cap all the time. Finally, the prayer shawl is worn as mandated by Numbers 15: 37 and Deuteronomy 22: 12.

4. Synagogue Services

Also unlike worship for most factions of the Christian religion, synagogues have three core services everyday of the week with the fourth one being restricted to the Shabbat and very few occasional festivities in the Jewish community. These three daily services are very similar with minimal variations here and there. The greatest distinction of the type of services held in the synagogue is actually based the various days of the week. It must be mentioned that days play a crucial role in the religious beliefs of the Jewish community just as it does for many of the modern age religions. To this effect, the core worship activity that takes place on Mondays, Thursdays and the Shabbat is the reading of the Torah and it is standard procedure for this to be complimented by prayers and Psalms. It must be mentioned that Psalms are sung at various interval in the course of the service and are primarily from the book of a similar name found in the Tanakh. Just it is in Christianity, worshippers in the synagogue and the Jewish community in general can be categorized into three broad groupings; Conservatives, Progressives and Orthodox Jews. As far as services conducted in the synagogue are concerned, Orthodox Jews are more traditional in the way they conduct their services while Progressive and Conservative Jews are more innovative and therefore their services have consequently changed with time.

In addition to this, the Jewish doctrinal beliefs are very specific about the

minimum number of congregants who can attend a synagogue worship service at any particular time. This is unlike other religions whereby even a quorum of one person qualifies for a service to begin. A synagogue worship service can commence if and only if there are at the very least a minimum of 10 people in attendance. This quorum of ten is commonly referred to as a minyan which literally means “ ten Jews”. Emphasis on this quorum of at least 10 people present for a service to begin is of fundamental significance to the Jewish people. This is because as earlier mentioned, in the Jewish society the synagogue is the primary gathering place while the individual homes and households are the primary worship areas. It is mandatory for each person in attendance to have a prayer book which is also referred to as the Siddur, which they follow to follow the proceedings of the service. In addition to this, modern synagogue services can either be led by a rabbi, cantor or any member of the congregation in attendance. The dynamics of the service involve the person leading service from the prayer book as the rest of the congregation follow their lead.

In addition to the aforementioned, it is significant to point out that the synagogue service has a very distinct name. The worship service in the synagogue is referred to as Siddur, just like the prayer book used in the course of the service. The service must begin with a blessing. In fact, Jewish doctrine and theology mandates that this blessing be said at the beginning of every new day. This blessing is normally followed by another one that specifically thanks God. Jews normally thank God for the Torah, sight, clothing and provision of material needs in that order. After this, the rabbi leads the congregation in reciting the Shema. This is closely followed by the recital of

the Amidah which is basically a collection of blessings prayers which centered on praise, requests and thanksgiving. The recital of the Amidah takes place while the congregation is standing in reverence to the sanctity of the collection of prayers.

After the recital of the Amidah, the reading of the Torah follows. The Torah scroll is taken from the ark to the bimah where the actual reading usually takes place. It must be mentioned that is such an honor for a congregant to be allowed to read the Torah. In fact, this privilege is only enjoyed by male congregant in synagogues located in the Orthodox Jewish communities. The reading of the Torah is consequently followed by the reading of a special passage the Tanakh that is referred to as the haf Torah. Several other blessings of all manner of sort are then recited before the Torah scroll is carried through the synagogue back to the ark for safekeeping. After the Torah scroll has been kept safely in the ark, the synagogue service embarks the sermon aspect of the worship ceremony. In addition to reciting blessings and thanksgiving prayers, singing also doe constitute a great portion of a typical synagogue service. Finally, it is significant to assert that the prayers held in the synagogue are of many forms and subsequently vary from place to place depending on the Jewish community in question. Most importantly, a synagogue service is based on the ideology of avodah sh'belev or simply put worship of the heart. This therefore implies that a typical synagogue service can be as long several hours depending on the avodah sh'belev of the congregants.

Finally, the Jewish doctrine and theology prescribe that worshippers are not supposed to work during Shabbat. As a result of this, it is common practice

for Jews to walk to the synagogue specifically during Shabbat and special Jewish festivities for worship services to avoid contravening the “do not work” command. This is however dependent on the distance of the synagogue in relation to the dwelling place of the Jewish community. Such rules are adhered to religiously among Orthodox Jews who are renowned for their extremities. Other extreme religious beliefs adhered to by the Orthodox Jews as far as worship services in the synagogue are concerned include the following. First and foremost, in Orthodox synagogues no musical instrument is played in the entire course of the service. In addition to this, the worship service in Orthodox synagogues is normally presided over by none other than a cantor who must be a man. Finally, the sitting arrangement in the Orthodox synagogue is segregated based on gender. Men congregants sit in the main area of the synagogue separated from the women.

5. Conclusions

A synagogue can be basically be defined as the house of worship for members of the Jewish community of the Judaism religion. The term was coined from a Greek word that means meeting point and therefore the primary function of the synagogue is defined by the meaning. The concept of worshipping in synagogues developed while Jews were exiled to Babylon and was further developed upon during the exile as a result of the roman invasion. Basically, the synagogue acted as an alternative worship house to the temple of Jerusalem. As such, the synagogue has various structural as well as architectural designs that are similar to all synagogues on the face of the planet.

This structural and architectural designs range from having an ark located at

the side facing the city of Jerusalem, to not having any form representation of God within its premises. The sole purpose of these structural and architectural designs is to remind of the Jewish of the origins of their religious beliefs and heritage. Finally, synagogue worship services are very specific and distinct. The characteristics of these services range from having three services everyday of the week and the fourth on the Shabbat to having minimum quorum of ten people for the service to begin. Despite all these specifications, it must be mentioned that worship services in the synagogue are based on the concept of avodah sh'belev. It is significant to point out that the most important role the synagogue plays in the Jewish society is social nature. As mentioned over and over in the course of the paper, the synagogue is basically gathering place where Jews meet to doctrinal and theological knowledge as well as support, bless and pray for one another. As a result this, the synagogue is at the core of the Jewish existence.

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