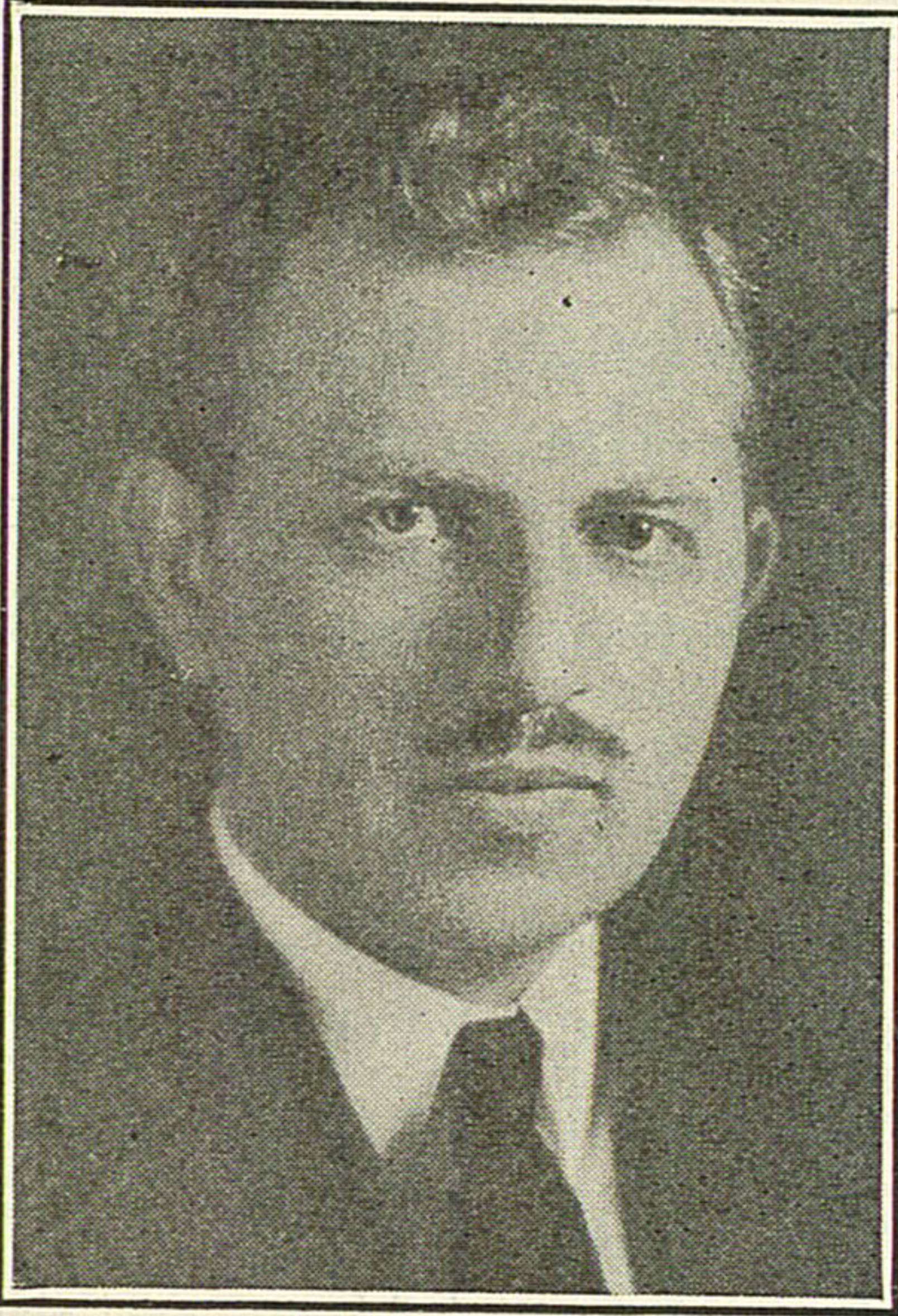


# The Importance of the Synagogue in the Jewish Life

By Rabbi S. B. Friedman

Poale Zedeck Congregation

**T**HE suggestion made to me to write about the synagogue as my contribution to the annual New Year number is a timely one, since at this season of the year the religious, as well as the national Jew, thinks about the synagogue. Then again since Congregation Poale Zedeck, of which I am the spiritual leader, is at the present time erecting a new house of worship in one of the new sections of Pittsburgh, I deem it doubly appropriate and fitting to



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write about "The Importance of the Synagogue in Jewish Life".

In discussing this topic a word should first be said about the history and origin of this worthy Jewish institution. The synagogue has proved to be the most enduring of all the institutions in Israel, as will be here shown, that for centuries the whole spiritual, intellectual and social life of the Jew was centered in the synagogue which was the symbol and barometer of the Jewish people.

The name synagogue is a Greek word meaning a place of meeting, which, in the Aramaic language of the Talmud, is referred to as the Be Knishta, the House of Assembly. Just when and where the synagogue was first established has been a question to this day has not been definitely decided. Both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars differ widely as to the beginning of the synagogue. Some trace its origin as far back as the patriarchal age, supporting their argument, that the words mentioned in the Bible, "And he called upon the name of the Lord", signify a place dedicated by him to God. The Talmud, interpreting certain Biblical phrases, relates that Abraham selected such sacred places on the mountain tops calling them the "Mount of God", his son, Isaac, prayed in the "fields", and Jacob confined his prayers to the "house".

Most scholars, however, contend that the synagogue in the sense that we now understand it to be is a post-exilic institution. That by reason of imperative necessity it came into existence as a substitute for the temple, which was itself a reproduction of the

tabernacle in the desert, and was called by the Prophet Ezekiel the "Mikdash M'att", miniature sanctuary. After the first temple was destroyed and reduced to ashes, the Jews exiled from Palestine found it urgent to establish a place of public worship. For this reason it is claimed that the synagogue which responded to this emergency sprang into being in Babylonia, Persia, and Egypt, where the Jews were dispersed. At the completion of the seventy years' exile, those who returned to Judea to rebuild the second temple, brought back with them, also, their synagogue. Tradition ascribing fixed formulas for prayer to Ezra and his Tribunal, that later assumed a certain uniformity in the time of the Anshe Knesseth Hagdolo.

Whatever may be the correct version as to the history of the synagogue, yet there is sufficient proof that the synagogue served a three-fold purpose, as its Hebrew appellations imply Beth Tephiloh (House of Prayer), Beth Hamedrash (House of Study), and Beth Haknesseth (House of Assembly). The question again only arises as to the chronological order of these three divisions. Some historians believe its primary function to have been a place of communal worship. That later also a place for public instruction was sought, and that for economic reasons the synagogue was utilized, becoming ultimately the Beth Hamedrash. For the same reason in time it also developed into the meeting house of the people, the Beth Haknesseth, where the Jews assembled to discuss their secular affairs.

Other scholars again wish to prove the reverse, that the people's House of Assembly took on later its religious character as a house of worship, citing the Aramaic translation of the word "Shaar" (Gate) mentioned in Amos 5:12 as "Be Knishta". The Gate in those days comparing to our former village town halls, where litigants, officials, legislators, students, merchants and the masses met to transact their respective individual interests and communal affairs. The house of prayer being a later development. This contention, in my opinion, is erroneous, since the Aramaic translation of the word Gate as Be Knishta, which literally means House of Assembly, may, nevertheless, still denote a meeting place for the purposes enumerated. Should it also imply House of Solemn Assembly, as the Hebrew word Beth Haknesseth is commonly interpreted, yet there is no proof that its secular and social functions preceded the religious ones.

Whatever may be the exact facts about the history of the synagogue, yet it is the unanimous opinion among students that the synagogue is and was the most important institution in the life of the Jewish people, as well as the center of its communal life. The synagogue was intimately

connected with the history, growth and development of the Jewish nation.

It was this remarkable institution that united, strengthened and perpetuated the Jewish race in time of prosperity, as well as in adversity. Throughout the dark ages of Jewish massacres, pogroms and persecutions, the synagogue was the stronghold of hope and encouragement in the East and the West.

The sacred trinity of God, Torah and Israel, that according to the Zohar is the most perfect unity was exemplified in the synagogue, being carried out through the three things upon which the world stands mentioned by one of our sages in Abboth 1:2, namely, Torah Avodah U'Gmilloth Chassodim (Education, Worship and Social Service).

The Jew would betake himself to the synagogue not only for regular public worship, but also in the hours of grief and sorrow, as well as in the seasons of solemn joy he would come to the synagogue to pour out his heart in prayer and supplication or offer thanks and praise to Him for His beneficent blessings. From the time of birth to the day of death, the Jew is closely bound up with the synagogue. When a child is born the father is called to the Torah at the synagogue, and if the new-born baby is a girl, her Jewish name is then and there pronounced. When the son reaches his thirteenth birthday, the age of maturity according to Jewish law, and when he is later joined in wedlock, the synagogue is again customarily visited. Finally, when either one of the parents pass into the world beyond, the orphan is again seen at the synagogue, reciting the Kaddish for the dead, and derives comfort and courage from the divine inspiration. In this manner the congregation participates in the individual sorrow or happiness by expressing its sympathies or felicitations, respectively. All this being included under the heading of Avodah (worship).

The synagogue in the past, as well as in the present, does and should provide facilities to educate our young. The Talmud Torah, the Hebrew School, must form an important part of the synagogue, where the children can be given an intensive Jewish education and the religion of our fathers taught to them, fulfilling the second pillar, Torah.

Even the third element of the said classification, namely, Gmilloth Chassudim (Social Service), and the whole idea of public charities which originated in the synagogues of ancient times, providing the poor and the indigent wayfarer with food, shelter and other necessities, should likewise today be included as part of its program. The spirit of charity and benevolence, to the extent, at least, that the unfortunate ones shall be cared for, and the philanthropic and charitable institutions supported should prevail and find a place in our synagogues. Any activ-

ity that promotes social improvement and advances healthful recreation should also be encouraged within the walls of the synagogue.

Living in an age of specialization and organization the synagogue, founded on the above-mentioned three elements, worship, education and social service, should directly and indirectly be affiliated with the following respective institutions carrying on similar work on a wider scope and larger scale, such as (1) Union of Congregations, local or national; (2) Board of Jewish Education; (3) Federation of Jewish Charities, so that greater good can be derived through contact and inter-relation with identical institutions. Thus, by interchange of views, the respective activities of the individual synagogues would be unified and centralized, fortified and solidified for E Pluribus Unum.

Though the religious work, the inner soul and spirit of the synagogue is of prime importance, yet we must also be concerned about the body, the external beauty and interior decorations of the synagogue, so that it be a place of attraction for young and old. We should, however, be guarded against giving the latter, the external splendor, first consideration.

In olden times, too, quite some stress was laid upon the architecture of the holy edifice, representing various styles, some original, some borrowed, as the Greek, the Romanesque, the Gothic and the Moorish. The interior contained magnificent furnishings and decorations, unique mosaic designs, carved wood and marble, richly embroidered curtains hung before the Ark containing the Holy Scrolls, and the gorgeous illuminating fixtures, all combined creating a very beautiful and impressive atmosphere.

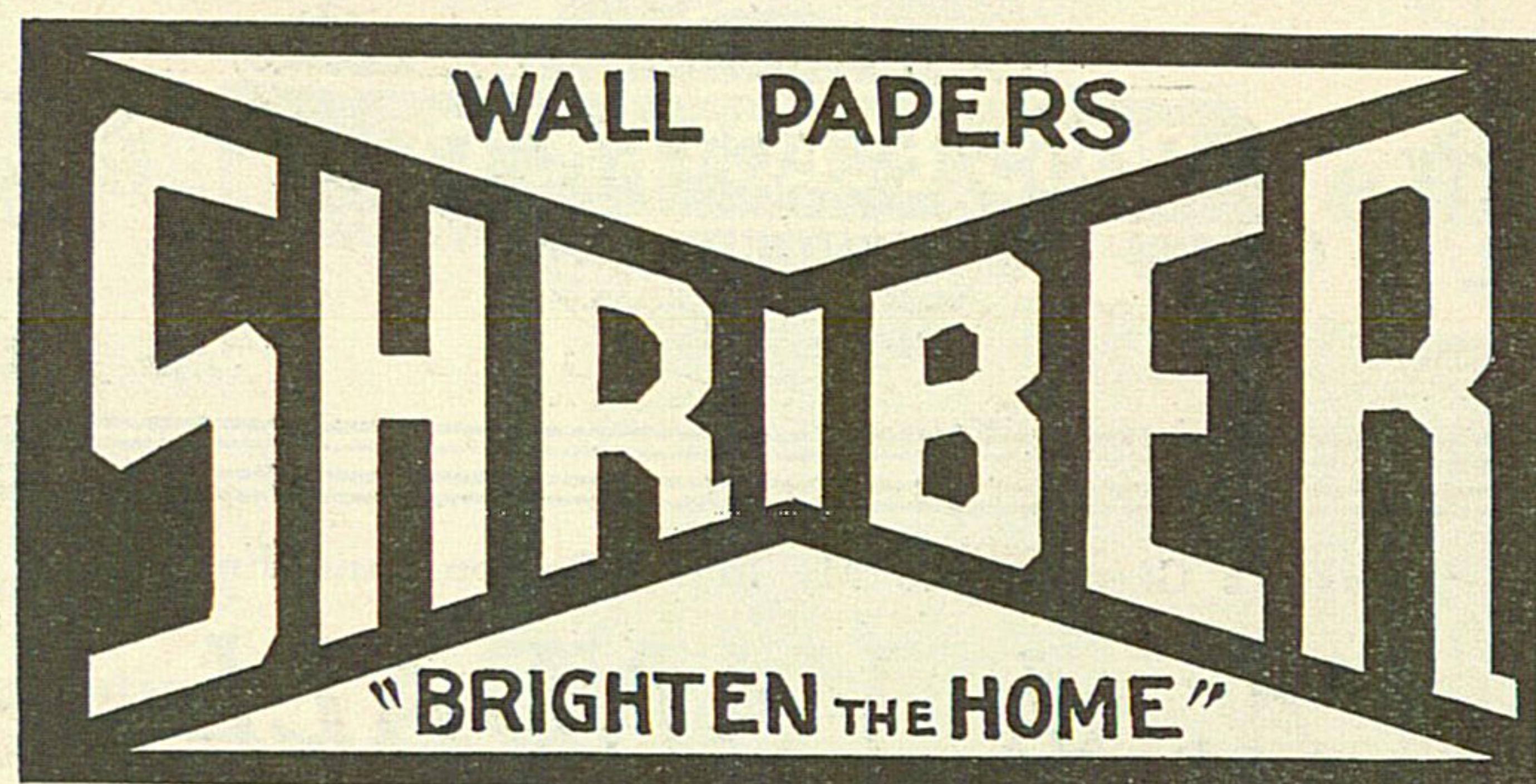
The height of the synagogue was at times restricted. Though the Talmud enjoined the roof of a private dwelling from being higher than the cupola of the synagogue, the Moors, on the other hand, forbade the Jews to build their synagogues higher than the Mohammedan mosques.

The synagogue was a target of destruction in Christian countries, as well as under the caliphate. Some rulers were more lenient in their decrees, they would not destroy old synagogues, but would not permit the erection of new ones. Omar the second of the eighth century wrote to his governors, "Do not pull down a church or a synagogue, but do not allow new ones to be built". Even in the early days of New York, when it was still known as New Amsterdam, the privilege of building a Jewish House of Worship was not readily granted.

Today, we in America, living in the land of freedom and religious liberty, cannot visualize how our forefathers were handicapped in their struggles for religious equality. We have every reason to rejoice when we read the statistics indicating the great number

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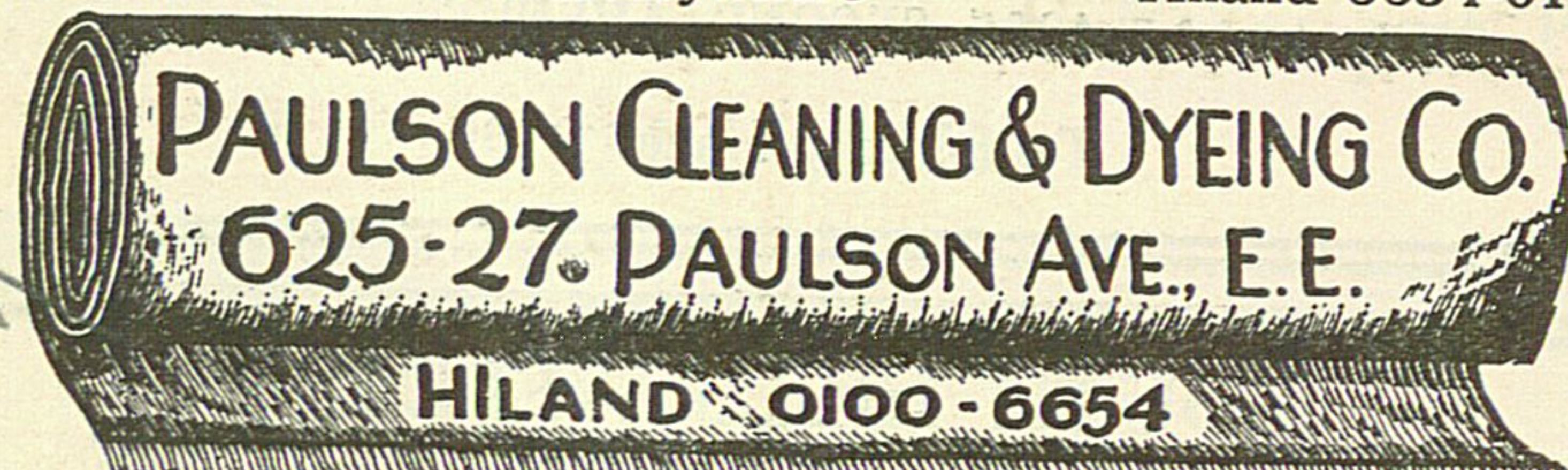
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culty wherever they have been educated to recognize the need of religion as a thing beautiful and soulful. I am strongly in favor of the "back-to-religion" movement sponsored by Judge Otto A. Rosalsky and the *Ivriah* headed by Mrs. Joseph Leblang deserve much for the great good they are accomplishing in promoting religious interest.

As for me, I must say that what little I am today I owe to the orthodoxy and teachings of my mother. She it is who made me see the great hope that lies in Judaism. It was not always so. I, too, learned too much to the side of the "reformed". It was the easiest way. But in later years something deeper than my will, something greater than my desire, made me pause and wonder. There came to me as there must to all who want to think clearly a feeling of loss—a regret that I had little or nothing for my religion. And what is the matter with going through forms and rituals and ceremonies, because after all, they are based on sentiment.

Money and power may bring shaded lights, soft carpets, lovely walls, material things; the mere veneer that hides the false gods within; but the golden heart of a Jewish mother, the inspiring devotion of a fine father, cannot be bought for money. The charitable heart of the Jew cannot be bought with money; it must be developed through religion and idealism. These elements are fundamental, impregnable in the Jewish religion. These vital requisites are to be found in the hovel of the pauper as well as in the palace of the peer. Wherever they are, love is, real love, untarnished, undefiled and forever present; as for the rest, nothing is insurmountable—it can be attained. We are fools if we brush aside the most precious thing in the world, our great religion, among the greatest of the world, the religion which has for its foundation the true brotherhood of man. Ah, surely, we have sold our birthright, many a time, for a mess of pottage.

Through clear and unflinching lens, every youth must see the fact that his grandfather and his grandmother

has carried on the religion and created the environment of his mother and father, and that they in turn have made his and that he must carry on and make environments for the next process of evolution of the Jewish race, every race. It is something that can be held, held fast, not only for one's self but for the duty to those who come after.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SYNAGOGUE IN THE JEWISH LIFE

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Social refreshments to follow Friday evening lectures; (4) Sisterhood—To of synagogues that are constructed annually in America, at the present time.

To maintain the traditional three-fold purpose of the synagogue—Torah (Education); Avodah (Worship); and Gmilloth Chassudim (Social Service); every synagogue should aim to be a Jewish Center for the child, adolescent and adult through Religious, Educational and Social activities. As a suggestion the following could be provided for under the respective mentioned headings—(1) Religious—Synagogues, where services are conducted with reverence, devotion, order and decorum; Daily, Sabbath and Holiday Services; Congregational Singing; Sermons in Jewish and English; Junior Congregation; Special services for children and youth on Sabbath and Holidays; (2) Educational—Daily Talmud Torah; Religious School on Sunday mornings; Bar Mitzvah classes; Post-graduate courses for boys and girls in Bible, Jewish History, Literature, Ethics and Ceremonies; Graduation exercises; Daily morning and evening study circles for adults; Friday evening Forum and lectures; Saturday afternoon study circles for adults; Special study circles for women; Jewish library; (3) Social—Various clubs and activities; Boy Scouts, under the direction of Sisterhood Committee; Recreational and athletic facilities; Special accommodations for the social entertainment and reception of its members and friends; serve an auxiliary to the congregation; Junior Sisterhood.

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