

GUIDE



To The Symbols and Decorations
OF
The Beth Israel Synagogue
Washington, Pennsylvania



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Dedicated to the memory of Alexander Sharove, architect of this Synagogue and center, and the creator of the designs and symbols that are explained and described in this brochure.



And they shall make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. —Exodus 25:8

THE ARK

On entering the main sanctuary, your attention is immediately drawn to center of the altar. This is the Holy Ark. In the ancient Temple of Jerusalem a portable Ark was kept in the part of the building known as the Holy of Holies. Inside were the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. The modern synagogue Ark contains parchment scrolls on which the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) have been written by hand. This archaic method of reproducing the books of the Scriptures, long after the invention of printing, serves as a reminder that the Jews are the "People of the Book", linked by an unbroken tradition to those Hebrews who first committed the Word of God to writing.

During the morning service on Sabbaths and Festivals, the scrolls are removed from the Ark in a solemn ceremony, and carried to the reading desk (facing you on the right), where first a Scripture lesson is read. This is followed by a lesson from the Prophets, which however, is read from a printed Bible. Originally this, too, was read from a hand-written scroll.

Depicted on each panel of the doors of the Ark is a palm branch, a citron and some other leaves. This is primarily a symbol of God's bounty and of man's gratitude. It represents the festival bouquet which is carried in procession on the Festival of Tabernacles, the ancient Hebrew festival of Thanksgiving. A description of it is found in LEVITICUS 23:40: "And ye shall take . . . the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days."

The palm branch, however, has also a secondary meaning. In biblical imagery, the upright palm-tree stands for the man who is upright in his way of life. (Cf. PSALM 92:13, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree.") Since the God of Israel is best served through righteous living, the palm branch, symbol of righteousness, has been a motif of Jewish art since ancient days. It appeared in Solomon's Temple as well as on later Hebrew coins and is still used on some of the coins and stamps of modern Israel.

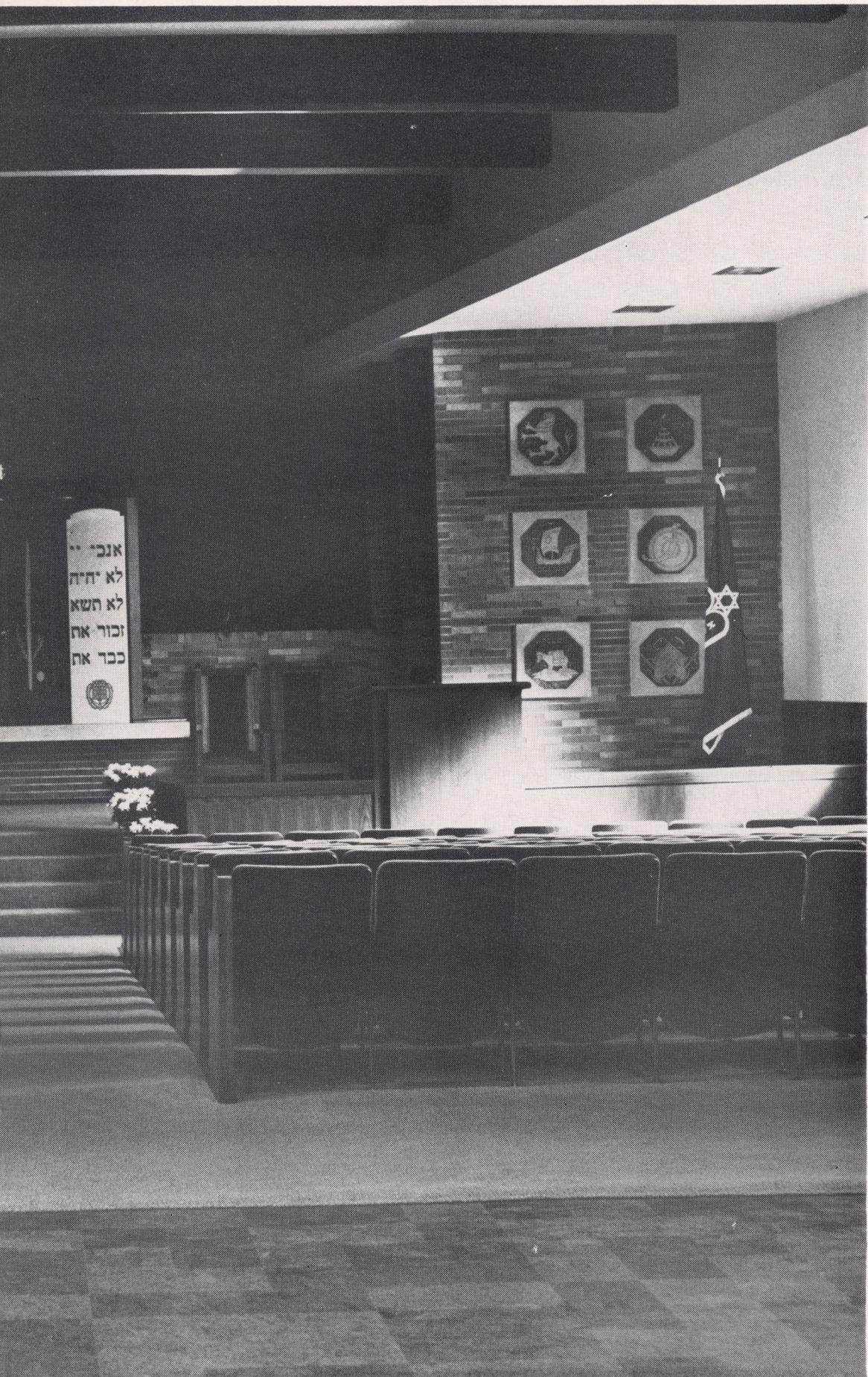
The two marble slabs to the right and left of the Ark contain the first two words of each of the Ten Commandments, in the original Hebrew. The design at the bottom of each slab is a stylized pinecone, placed there for decorative purposes only.

In front of the Ark, suspended from the ceiling, is the Eternal Light. Linked by Tradition with the light that was kept burning perpetually in the Temple of old, the Eternal Light symbolizes the purity and the permanency of our Faith. It calls to mind such Scripture verses as: "The LORD is my light and my salvation"; "The spirit of man is the light of the LORD"; "For the commandment is a lamp, and the Law is light"; and "I, the LORD, have set thee for a covenant of the people, and for a light unto the nations". This Eternal Light comes from Jerusalem and has been in use for more than a century.



לא תרצח
לא תנאף
לא תנב
לא תענה
לא תחמד





אנכי
לא יהיה
לא תשא
זכור את
כבוד את



The Twelve Tribes

On the brick walls, to the right and left of the Ark, are twelve plaques, symbolizing the Twelve Tribes of Israel. This imagery is derived from the Blessing of Jacob (GENESIS, chapter 49) and from the Blessing of Moses (DEUTERONOMY, chapter 33). Starting at the extreme right, and reading downward, we have the following:

REUBEN, who, according to GENESIS 49:4, was “unstable as water”.

SIMEON, of which tribe it was said: “Weapons of violence are their swords.” (GENESIS 49:5).

LEVI. This was the priestly tribe. The plaque depicts the High Priest’s breast-plate, identified by Tradition with the oracle of the URIM and THUMMIM. We read in DEUTERONOMY 33:8, “And of Levi he said, Let thy Thummim and Urim be with thy holy one.”

Also shown is a pair of hands in the traditional posture assumed by the priests when blessing the people. The fingers of both hands form the Hebrew letter *shin*, which is the first letter of the word *Shadday*,—Hebrew for “Almighty God”.

The plaque also shows the “budding rod of Aaron”, about which we read in NUMBERS, chapter 17.

The second row of plaques from the right represents:—

JUDAH, who in GENESIS 49:9, is compared to “a lion’s whelp”.

ZEBULUN, who, according to GENESIS 49:13, “shall dwell at the shore of the sea; and he shall be a shore for ships.”

ISSACHAR, who is compared to “a large-boned ass”. (GENESIS 49:14).

The first row of plaques to the left of the Ark represents:—

DAN, of whom GENESIS 49:17 says: “Dan shall be a serpent in the way”.

GAD, of whom we read: “Gad, a troop shall overcome him; but he shall overcome at the last.” (GENESIS 49:19). In the original Hebrew, this is a pun on the name Gad: *gad gedud yegudennu vehu yagud 'aqebh*.

ASHER, who according to GENESIS 49:20, received the blessing: “Asher’s food shall be rich; and he shall yield royal dainties.”

The last row of plaques to the left of the Ark represents:—

NAPHTALI, whom GENESIS 49:21 describes as “a hind let loose”.

EPHRAIM and MANASSEH are the two tribes descended from Joseph, of whom it was said: “Joseph is a fruitful vine, A fruitful vine by a fountain.” (GENESIS 49:22).

BENJAMIN has been likened to “a wolf that raveneth” (GENESIS 49:27).

By reminding themselves of the Twelve Tribes, Jews, assembled for worship in the synagogue thus become conscious of the fact that they are descendants of the ancient Israelites with whom God made His covenant.



My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. —ISAIAH 56:7