

CONGREGATING AND CONSECRATING AT CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE

THE BUILDING OF
A RELIGIOUS FELLOWSHIP
AND PUBLIC CEREMONIES

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PHOTO BY C.K. BILL. CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE ARCHIVES



Congregation Ahawath Chesed, now Central Synagogue, 1872.





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Elizabeth Blackmar and Arthur Goren
Columbia University



FOREWORD

Central Synagogue has its roots in the formative years of our country and our city. From the 1830s on it has been giving spiritual leadership and comfort to its membership, and it has also been a landmark institution in the overall functioning of the community. What decisions were made in determining the place of Central Synagogue in both the religious and secular community, and how these decisions were arrived at, can teach us a great deal about how our community and our people functioned and developed. Every generation stands on the shoulders of previous generations. The more we learn from our history, the better we are able to cope with the present and plan for the future. For these reasons, and at the urging of our brother, Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, we have chosen to endow the Rubinstein Family Archival Fund. The purpose of this fund is to provide research in the Central Synagogue Archives by appropriate scholars resulting in lectures and papers on the congregation's history. The first award-winning monograph as a result of that fund was by Andrew Dolkart of Columbia University. It was entitled *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood*. This monograph is the second in the series.

Robin and Larry Rubinstein.



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THE CONGREGATION AND THE CITY

BY
ELIZABETH BLACKMAR





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Introduction

The rebuilding and rededication of Central Synagogue after the 1998 fire serves as a fitting emblem of both the congregation's remarkable longevity in the same neighborhood and its phoenix-like capacity to reinvigorate itself. The synagogue has repeatedly honored its history in public ceremonies, from the December, 1870 laying of the cornerstone to the September 9, 2001 rededication, as well as through celebrations of anniversaries. On these occasions, the congregation has reached out and brought a larger public into its own fellowship, affirming members' reciprocal ties to the City of New York. Behind the public ceremonies stands an institutional story of how members built and sustained their synagogue, often in the face of daunting challenges. After all, one cannot take for granted that because an institution is strong in one generation, it will survive in the next. New York City's dynamism, the movement of people in and out or from downtown to uptown, the rise of cultural practices that compete with the religious life, the tensions that sometimes emerge between generations or between classes, the economic pressures of maintaining institutions, including preserving and restoring old buildings—all these forces impinge on the life of congregations. And yet the vitality of a congregation is also forged through its active engagement with the life of the city, in its institutional contributions and in the contributions of individual members. This essay looks at some of the ways that Central Synagogue's congregations folded the changing conditions of city life into their own history.



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This history matters not only to members of the congregation, but to New Yorkers who seek to understand how the city's voluntary associations have sustained themselves. Taking cues from the nineteenth-century French sociologist Alexis DeTocqueville, contemporary political philosophers and sociologists have wondered whether Americans are falling away from traditions of association—whether for purposes of worship or socializing—that have long been a mainstay of democratic public life, a focal point of collective activity that counters corrosive forces of individualism in a market society.¹ To assess the capacity of Americans to govern themselves, to care for one another, and to maintain a shared sense of spiritual purpose, historians of religion have urged that more attention be paid to congregations.² To ask how Central Synagogue has changed over generations in relation to the city, then, is to take a small sliver of a larger inquiry into the intersecting histories of congregations and American democracy.

The outlines of Central Synagogue's history have been well sketched in Andrew Dolkart's *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood*, the first essay in this series.³ As German and Bohemian Jews emigrated in the mid-nineteenth century and settled in New York, they adopted the American congregational model for organizing their religious life. This congregational order contrasted to the communal order of Europe, where synagogues operated under a centralized Jewish authority, tacitly authorized, in turn, by the state. The formation of new temples by congregations that shared a particular



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language and ritual also shifted authority away from New York's first synagogue, Shearith Israel, founded by Sephardic Jews in the seventeenth century. By 1850, New York had as many as twenty Jewish congregations, most of them meeting without a rabbi in converted churches or rented rooms, and each of them aspiring to create a temple that would serve not only current members but future generations.⁴

The highly-committed young German immigrants who established Shaar Hashomayim in 1839, or those from Prague who formed Ahawath Chesed in 1846, must have felt a remarkable independence and responsibility as laymen creating their own religious fellowships. Most of the congregations' members were engaged in trades or merchandising—clothing, hardware, cigar-making—and as was true of most of the German-speaking immigrants in New York City, they brought with them basic education, skills, and a work ethic that allowed many, over the course of their lives, to establish comfortable homes for themselves and their families.⁵ In 1870, Ahawath Chesed began building the synagogue at Lexington Avenue and 55th Street, consecrating it in April 1872. In 1898, Shaar Hashomayim, whose temple at that time was on 15th Street, across from Stuyvesant Square, merged with Ahawath Chesed.

By the early twentieth century, American-born members of the synagogue were likely to have had some higher education. In addition to merchandising and manufacturing, some were moving into the professions of law or education; others worked in finance,



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real estate, or public relations. And by the 1920s, upwardly mobile, second-generation East European Jews had also begun to join what was now known as Central Synagogue, which had hired its first Russian-born rabbi, Nathan Krass, in 1918.⁶ In the last third of the twentieth century, the congregation continued to be distinguished by a high representation of well-educated and successful men and women in professions as well as in business, the majority living on the Upper East Side. Many members after 1970 had no prior family ties but rather chose to join the congregation as one among many with which they might have affiliated.

The institutional history of Central Synagogue parallels that of many of New York's other Reform temples as well as its most prominent Protestant churches. Still, as we place Central Synagogue within the history of New York, we must ask how this congregation survived and revived in a city that has seen equally ambitious and venerable institutions succumb. The economic well-being of many of the members is surely one condition of its long history, but it is far from a sufficient explanation for the continuity in one place, since many other prosperous congregations chose to relocate their synagogues as their congregants moved to new neighborhoods. Central Synagogue's members not only formed a strong sense of collective identity and history in relation to their magnificent temple, they also absorbed social and religious changes in such a way as to recruit and accommodate members with new expectations or felt needs. Precisely because Central Synagogue sustained continuity by periodically revising



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what the congregation offered or meant to members, its history exemplifies changing patterns of congregational life within Reform Judaism in New York and across the United States.

Congregations in the American Republic

The congregational system that developed with the disestablishment of the Anglican church in New York after the American Revolution placed religious bonds at the center of associational life. By 1850, the nation had some 38,061 places of worship, and one-fifth of the population were members of congregations.⁷ What was required to create congregations was a system of self-taxing. (In the early republic, of course, government taxation was itself relatively light, precisely because neither local nor federal governments offered much by way of public facilities or welfare programs. This was an era before the income tax, and property taxes seldom exceeded two percent of the assessed value of houses or land). Voluntary associations rested on the willingness of members to commit themselves and a share of their income to a common good. In the nineteenth century, the level of commitment of time and money from individuals with limited financial resources or leisure time was remarkably high. Shaar Hashomayim and Ahawath Chesed were each formed for worship and religious education by less than twenty men on behalf of themselves and their families. Their boards of trustees met monthly to manage the synagogues' affairs as they gained — and sometimes lost — members. At the time of their 1898 merger, Ahawath Chesed had 166



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members and their families, and Shaar Hashomayim 77.⁸

American religious fellowship was cemented in what we think of today as business terms: congregations had to apply to the state for corporate charters, and in exchange for services that benefited the public, they gained the collective power to raise and spend money, buy and sell property, and take on debt. (In fact, "public service" corporations preceded and provided the institutional template for American business corporations in the mid-nineteenth century.)⁹ Ahawath Chesed and Shaar Hashomayim, like New York's mainline Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches, also adopted a property model for establishing the reciprocal claims of members and congregation.¹⁰ Members purchased family pews, paying a premium which varied by location within the sanctuary, and then paid yearly assessments for the communal house of worship. Those who could not afford to buy a pew could nonetheless participate in the congregation's ritual life by renting a pew and paying dues. When Ahawath Chesed moved to its new temple on East 4th Street in 1865, the congregation voted to have "names of the owners of seats affixed to them," a practice that was continued with nameplates in its new home on Lexington Avenue.¹¹

Property ownership was historically viewed in the American republic as the marker of a man's independence and capacity for citizenship. By the time these congregations formed, the property qualification for voting had been eliminated for white men. Still, the sale of pews preserved an older equation of ownership and rights within the community, including the right to participate in



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congregational meetings, an echo of the democratic “town meeting” tradition that was transferred to voluntary associations. Although widows could inherit pews, initially they could not vote in congregational meetings. Members who defaulted on their annual obligation—their dues or taxes—lost their right to belong and gave up their property in a particular pew. The trustees’ enforcement of the obligations of membership was stricter than that of government, for the New York legislature recognized the public importance of pews as property by exempting them from seizure for debt in the case of bankruptcy.¹² To confiscate the means of worship would be to demoralize civil society. This respect for congregational order was further demonstrated when public officials attended the consecrations of churches and synagogues.

The capacity to shoulder the full obligations of congregational life was taken as a measure of a man’s social standing. When the Lexington Avenue temple opened in 1872, the price of the best family pews was \$1,250, equivalent to the price of a vacant uptown lot or a young lawyer’s annual salary, and carried with it a 10 percent annual assessment. Pews consisted of 8 seats. The least expensive pews in the back of the balcony cost \$150. Not all members of the new synagogue could keep up with the congregation’s ambitions. In 1872, only 120 out of 182 members had purchased their seating, thereby raising \$147,625 through pew sales but leaving unsold seating worth \$133,400. In addition to selling and assessing pews to cover costs, the congregation relied on periodic donations from members as well as on the fund-raising



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powers of their affiliated organizations. Thus, Ahawath Chesed had taken a loan from the women's burial and sickness society, whose German name is imposingly translated as the Society of Righteous Ladies, when it purchased its building on East 4th Street and Avenue C in 1864, and that practice was carried over to the new synagogue. Individual trustees also dug into their still not very deep entrepreneurial pockets to donate or loan the congregation substantial sums.¹³

Central Synagogue's founding members taxed themselves to sustain their temple because the congregation was to be the center of their community lives, just as churches were for the city's most respectable Protestant families in nineteenth-century New York. A look at the budgets of Ahawath Chesed shows elements of the fellowship to which self-taxing tied members. Alongside acquisition and maintenance of their house of worship, the congregation hired a cantor early on and paid weekly fees to musicians. As they settled into their synagogue on East 4th Street in 1865, the trustees undertook to attract and suitably acknowledge a rabbi of stature, whose prominence would enhance the congregation's reputation within the city and within a national, even international, Jewish community.¹⁴

Ahawath Chesed's first two rabbis, Adolph Huebsch (1865-1885) and Alexander Kohut (1885-1893), were active in shaping both the ritual of their own congregation and larger debates over the direction of Reform Judaism. Thus, in the 1860s, Rabbi Huebsch modernized the congregation's liturgy, warning mem-



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bers that long, traditional prayers starved the “soul’s need for devotion.” At the same time he endorsed the stricter observance of the Sabbath, which the city’s other Reform congregations also advocated in a movement that mirrored the sabbatarian movement of the city’s Protestants—especially Presbyterians—in this period.¹⁵ Although Ahawath Chesed joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1878, Rabbi Kohut, for his part, offered a restraining hand to Reform by debating the “modernizing” impulses of the Pittsburgh Platform in the mid-1880s and continuing to conduct services in German. Their successors, Rabbis Isaac Moses (1901-1918), Nathan Krass (1918-1923), and Stephen S. Wise (1923-1925), were just as nationally prominent but stood at the opposite end of the Reform spectrum, with Moses embracing the modern “scientific” or historical reading of the Bible and Wise representing the social reform impulse that paralleled the “Social Gospel” in liberal Protestant circles. In this sense, whatever individual member’s doctrinal predilections, Central Synagogue’s congregation deferred to the vision of its spiritual leaders, even as the lay Board of Trustees kept tight control over governance.¹⁶

Members also invested in the congregation, of course, as the spiritual locus of life passages. Thus, as the 1918 by-laws put it, a member not only had the right “to send his children to religious school and have them confirmed in the synagogue, to have the marriage ceremony of his children performed by the Rabbi,” but also “in the event of his not owning a cemetery lot to have the



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right of interment for himself, his wife, and his unmarried minor children in the cemetery of the Congregation without charge except for opening, closing and maintenance of such graves."¹⁷ The importance of the cemetery to the community was underscored by the congregation's president, Ignaz Stein, in his speech at the 1870 cornerstone-laying for the new synagogue. Stein recalled that during its first funeral procession in 1848, the congregation had been stoned on its way to a burial lot in East New York, prompting the members to find a safer consecrated ground at Cypress Hills, also in Brooklyn.¹⁸ Over the next twenty-five years, Ahawath Chesed purchased substantial tracts at the near-by Linden Hill Cemetery in Queens; and Shaar Hashomayim added its lots at Salem Fields to the congregation's holdings. The synagogue's sexton, whose wage was supplemented by the commissions he received for collecting members' annual assessments and donations, oversaw funerals, with ritual support from both the men's and women's burial societies.¹⁹ Those societies also helped members and their families in times of illness.

Religious education was the final key element of the synagogue's early program. Thus, in 1865, the congregation of Ahawath Chesed resolved that even childless members were "entitled to have children of relatives attend the school." Attendance grew from 127 children when their new Sabbath school opened in November of 1867, directly overseen by Rabbi Huebsch, to the 276 children taught by six teachers in November of 1872.²⁰



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In their first generation, Central Synagogue's congregations were inward-looking associations whose primary purpose was to create an institution that fulfilled members' spiritual needs. This is not to say that members did not also reach out to the city individually or participate in a larger network of associational life. Many members of both congregations joined Jewish (as well as German) music societies, clubs, and lodges, including B'nai Brith; and these associations also served many of the city's Jews (numbering 150,000 in 1860) who did not belong to any synagogue.²¹ Congregational fellowship centered on worship and on the mutual care and regard of members. If this congregationally-based communal ethos reveals many Jewish immigrants' particular need to secure their families in a new, untested world, it also insured the respect of like-minded Christian families. Such affiliation helped render the city socially legible to its leading citizens. But the close knit character of religious congregations in their first generation also made them vulnerable to the indifference and even hostility of growing numbers of "unchurched" working-class New Yorkers—Gentiles and Jews alike—who stood outside their bonds of reciprocity.

The limits of republican congregationalism as a foundation of both Jewish community and civil society in New York can be seen in two ways. One was the difficulty that congregations had in sustaining their membership and means over generations and through the economic depressions that racked the industrializing nation and city in the last third of the nineteenth century. The



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second was the inadequacy of traditional practices of benevolence that transferred members' contributions from congregations to the city-wide organizations, especially Mt. Sinai Hospital and the United Hebrew Charities following the Civil War. Although members could donate their money, money alone could not provide a sense of connection to the city's new Jewish immigrants as well as to the general public. As it turned out, solutions to the problems of membership, charity, and connection would ultimately be linked.

The Ethos of Service

Almost immediately after the doors of the new Lexington Avenue synagogue opened, the congregation faced the strain of the Panic of 1873 and the economic depression that followed. Twenty years later, membership at Ahawath Chesed again declined during another financial panic and depression. Many of Shaar Hashomayim's members were also hard hit by the Panic of 1893, and the congregation lost members, even as it prepared to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary.²² In their respective petitions to the state court to merge, both congregations noted, as trustees for Ahawath Chesed put it, "of late years, owing to depression in business, the rental of pews has fallen off, both in amount and in number, members have been slower to pay their dues and as a consequence the income of [the synagogue] has become smaller, while the expenses have remained."²³ Although not the only instance of growth through combination (in 1874, for example, Anshe Chesed joined Beth El, which in 1927 united with Emanu-El),



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the 1898 merger signaled a collective flexibility that became characteristic of Central Synagogue through the next century. It infused both members and funds from the sale of Shaar Hashomayim's East 15th Street synagogue into the Lexington Avenue congregation. Still, the merger did not come without personal cost to those members of Shaar Hashomayim who resigned their membership because they did not want to travel uptown to worship or could not afford the new dues. And according to Rabbi Malcom Stern, a historian of Central Synagogue, Ahawath Chesed's own rabbi, David Davidson, who had been hired in 1893, opposed the merger and for this reason decided to give up his position.²⁴

Merger alone, moreover, could not renew the congregation. In the late nineteenth century, Christian as well as Jewish congregations found it hard to recruit a younger generation.²⁵ In some respects the generational problem was itself the outcome of the republican system of voluntary associations, for it was the children of propertied founders, as much as the unchurched propertyless, who most acutely felt their isolation—and the isolation of their parent's communal institutions—from the life of the city. Most famously articulated by Jane Addams as the "subjective need for settlement houses," the desire of a younger, educated generation to be useful and engaged in a larger social world is best represented at Central Synagogue by two members, Julia Richman, the daughter of Moses Richman, a trustee of Ahawath Chesed, and Rebecca Kohut, the second wife of Rabbi Alexander Kohut and step-mother to his eight children.²⁶



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Moses Richman, who ran a painting company, became a trustee of Ahawath Chesed in 1866; his son later served as the synagogue's secretary, and his three daughters taught in its school. Julia Richman graduated in 1872 from the Female Normal School (later Hunter College) and then pursued a career as a public school teacher, principal, and district superintendent. In the 1890s, she helped found the Educational Alliance to serve downtown Jews and contributed to the formation of the YWHA. Richman further devoted herself to improving the classroom materials used in Central Synagogue's and other Reform congregations' schools. Melding religious and secular service, she offered Central Synagogue's young women a new model of civic activism.

Rebecca Kohut helped organize a new "sisterhood of personal service" at the synagogue in 1889; by 1895, it claimed to have 350 members. In addition to continuing an older tradition of holding fairs to raise money for charity, members of the sisterhood donated their time and organizational skills to investigating the plight and assisting hundreds of poor Jewish families. New York's charities were divided by religion at the turn of the century, as many remain today. Had members of wealthier Jewish congregations not organized to address the needs of the more than two million Jewish immigrants who arrived between 1890 and 1910, there was no other public safety net. The United Hebrew Charities assigned districts to the sisterhoods of different congregations, and Central Synagogue's sisterhood hired its own case



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worker to co-ordinate the flow of donations to clients in the vicinity of East 101st Street. In addition to providing direct relief and purchasing milk, shoes, and clothing for needy families, the sisterhood (and its “junior” partner for younger women) ran a kindergarten, taught sewing classes, provided religious education for non-members, and developed impressive skills in managing accounts as well as in fund-raising.²⁷

If one thinks of the founders of Central Synagogue’s congregations as a generation of “new men” in a New World who reorganized communal life for American Jews, then their daughters were the “new women” who revised and expanded that fellowship. The 1918 revised by-laws tacitly recognized this contribution by establishing a new governing body that included women. This Council, comprised of representatives from the temple’s eight committees (School, Auditing, Ritual, Choir, House, Membership, Cemetery, and Nominating Committee) and from three women’s organizations (the Sisterhood, Ladies Auxiliary, and *Noshim Zidkonios* [Society of Righteous Ladies]), was charged with advising the board of trustees about congregational affairs.²⁸

The sisterhood marked the furthest-reaching initiative to engage members with the life of the city, but other features of what one historian has characterized as the “social congregation” also appealed to a younger generation.²⁹ The Young Men’s Association of Ahawath Chesed, founded in 1873, proposed “securing members for the congregation,” as they noted in 1893,



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by offering monthly lectures and musical programs. Performances of Beethoven or Wagner, travelogues illustrated with stereoscopic images of the Middle East, recitations from contemporary and socially relevant plays (for example, “Scene in a Tenement House”), and lectures on the “Usefulness of Great Men,” or the “Woman Question”—all these were seen as encouraging “social intercourse” while continuing to “benefit the parent organization” of Central Synagogue. In a sense, Central Synagogue’s young men, like the founders of the 92nd Street YMHA, extended the German *verein* tradition to a mixed audience, accommodating young people’s desires for edifying entertainment while implicitly providing an appropriate venue for courtship.³⁰

The burst of organizational energy that revived congregational life through social work or cultural self-improvement did not necessarily incorporate the congregation’s older members, however. The Society of Righteous Ladies (*Noschim Zidkonios*), first established in 1850, found its numbers and its mission depleted at the turn of the century, as funeral rituals moved into the hands of professional undertakers. Eschewing the flexibility recommended by the trustees, the older women resisted merging with the Women’s Auxiliary, which had charge of preparing the temple for holiday observances; and the Righteous Ladies persisted in recording their minutes in German long after the rest of the congregation had switched to English, even in the face of the intense anti-German propaganda of World War I. The older women seemed to fear that English would signal the end of tradition, as it in fact



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did when the last active members voted to disband in 1923.³¹

The congregation's new activities succeeded in expanding membership, but they too were vulnerable to the forces of change, as the sisterhood discovered after World War I, when its mission fell victim to its very success in establishing social work as a women's profession and charity as a field of scientific administration. Thus, as one member mournfully recalled, the Jewish Benevolent Association took over and centralized the social work of individual sisterhoods. In 1927, all of the congregation's women's associations were combined into the Women's Organization of Central Synagogue. In addition to temple service and programs for people with hearing and sight disabilities, the new sisterhood promoted cultural programs, holding regular exhibitions of the works of Jewish artists in the late 1920s and the 1930s.³² The synagogue's Young Men's Association also gave way, only to be reincarnated as the Temple Brotherhood, which took its agenda as much from men's civic clubs of the 1920s as from its predecessor's *verein* tradition of earnest self-improvement.

The activity that extended out from the congregation into the city placed Central Synagogue alongside other Reform congregations within the turn-of-the-century Progressive movement for social reform. It also helped define what historians have called the "institutional synagogue," a multi-purpose voluntary association that linked its members to the city not only by providing a fellowship for religious observance, but also for philanthropy, socializing, education, and recreation.³³ This broader mission



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brought new congregants to Central Synagogue, which tripled its membership from the time of the 1898 merger to Ahawath Chesed's 75th Anniversary in 1922; but it also increased pressures to expand the synagogue's facilities.

Even as the congregation prepared to celebrate its longevity, Daniel Kops, chairman of the arrangement committee, campaigned to raise money for a new community center in order to match the competition from other Reform congregations which were moving and building uptown and in the outer boroughs. (Having considered the possibility of its own move before World War I, Central Synagogue opted to expand within its own neighborhood.)³⁴ "A community center will give your children the opportunity to imbibe the true spirit of Jewish religion at an age when their minds are susceptible to a Jewish atmosphere," Kops told the congregation's 650 members in 1922. As though fulfilling his mandate, the children's pageant in honor of the 75th anniversary offered this synopsis of its program: "The watch word of modern American life is service. How it began in the New World, particularly in Old New York, is first shown. How under the influence of Judaism in Central Synagogue it later developed is next shown so that Central Synagogue of today stands for service not only to its own members but to all New York. Its trustees, who transact its affairs, its women's organizations, as well as its Sunday school, all depict the modern ideal of progressive Judaism."³⁵

It was in pursuit of the ideal of service that Central Synagogue



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tried its boldest experiment in 1924, when it federated with Rabbi Stephen Wise's Free Synagogue. After a year, trustees and members concluded that this was too great a departure from the congregation's own identity. Although one premise of Rabbi Wise's reform agenda was to substitute general dues and open seating for the older system of selling and assessing pews, Central Synagogue continued to tie membership to pews.³⁶ In 1926, the congregation purchased its community house at 35 East 62nd Street from the YWCA and balanced its modern aspirations to service with a sense of tradition by choosing as its new rabbi Jonah Bondi Wise, the son of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the Reform leader who had presided over the 1870 laying of the cornerstone. Rabbi Jonah Wise led Central Synagogue for more than thirty years, giving the congregation a modern national presence through his weekly radio program "The Message of Israel" as well as through his work with what became the United Jewish Appeal.

Like all American religious institutions, Central Synagogue again faced hard times during the Great Depression. The Women's Organization opened a canteen for unemployed women, a group whose needs were often overlooked by public relief programs. The larger congregation launched new membership drives and observed the temple's 90th Anniversary in 1936. But Rabbi Wise also worried about the inertia of committees. The cohort that had joined the congregation during its Progressive revival was aging, and less than a dozen new members joined each year through the 1930s. In 1937, the trustees wrote off as uncollectable dues from



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nearly one hundred members, and those who could not contribute resigned their membership. The staff took a cut in pay, while the trustees hired a comptroller to take administrative charge of its fiscal affairs. Yet, as the international crisis moved to the center stage, the organizational worries of the congregation receded in proportion to the support it gave Rabbi Jonah Wise in his highly visible initiatives on behalf of international Jewish relief.³⁷

Preserving the Urban Congregation

The unity among Reform congregations that followed not only the Holocaust but also the creation of the state of Israel provided a new context for revival following World War II. After a decade or more of stagnation, membership began to grow in the 1950s, even as the sphere of competition was redefined by the rise of new, prosperous, and energetic synagogue centers in the suburbs of Long Island, Westchester County and Northern New Jersey. To a certain degree, Central Synagogue, like other congregations, redirected its sense of “community service” toward the members themselves, and both congregational programs and the administrative apparatus to oversee them expanded in the 1950s and 1960s.

All congregations benefited, of course, from the baby boom and parents’ anxious desire to provide their children with a foundation of religious training. Yet, the very link between new families and new members also intensified turnover within the ranks of congregations, as members joined and resigned by the calendar of their children’s birthdays. Central Synagogue’s total membership



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figures—in the range of 1040 from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s—hid a constant flux of new or departing members each year. Such turnover could strain a sense of continuity and shared purpose. By the late 1950s, with an annual budget of just over \$200,000, the temple faced chronic annual deficits as well.

In the face of mobility and turnover, Reform temples, including Central Synagogue, drew support from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), which along side the National Association of Temple Administrators (established in 1941), promoted sound business practices for managing collective property and social programs. The UAHC encouraged congregations to share their strategies for recruiting members or making appeals; but unlike many suburban congregations, Central Synagogue had a double-edged history to contend with, one that conferred prestige but could also encumber appeals. Trustees worried, for example, that the older system that linked membership to specific pews discouraged newcomers. When the leveling off of the baby boom in the mid-1960s cut into school-related congregational membership, they proposed a sliding scale for dues-and-tuition based on age, a step away from the older tie between membership and proprietorship.

Following the death of Rabbi Wise in 1959, the trustees preserved continuity by promoting Dr. David J. Seligson, who had served as Associate Rabbi since 1945, to Senior Rabbi. They also emphatically voted for “modernization” by building a new community house on East 55th Street. Here again, the reciprocity



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between the city's and congregation's fortunes are worth underscoring. By building a new center of community, Central Synagogue offered a counterweight to the suburban flight of New York's white middle-class taxpayers. The congregation thus participated in the mid-1960s urbanist revival often associated with the energy of John Lindsay's mayoral administration and the Progressive liberalism of Senator Jacob Javits. Perhaps the congregation's most eloquent vote of confidence in the city was the campaign to landmark the temple itself. Here was a religious building, the congregation affirmed, that would not be abandoned nor left to become a nightclub.³⁸

And yet, at the very moment that the doors of the new community house on East 55th Street opened in 1968, the larger economy was declining under the weight of the Vietnam War, inflation, and then New York's own fiscal crisis. Again, with impressive creativity, the trustees subsidized the new community center by renting space to other organizations until the congregation was able to raise the funds to "burn the mortgage." Some members might chaff at the need to share communal space with outsiders, but such provisions also represented a kind of secular ecumenicalism, placing the congregation within a network of voluntary and non-profit institutions, which, by sustaining the associational fabric of civil society, helped see New York City through the troubled 1970s.

Meanwhile, Central Synagogue's members figuratively placed themselves at the head of New York's *urban* congregations by



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organizing the first exhibit on the social history of Jews in New York at the New-York Historical Society during the 1970s centennial celebration of the laying of the cornerstone.³⁹ With Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman leading Central Synagogue from 1972 to 1985, the congregation successfully offset the hundred or so resignations each year with new members in the 1970s. Then, membership gained momentum in the early 1980s, coinciding with the city's economic recovery and with the baby-boom generation's own coming of age as householders and as parents. What is significant for Central Synagogue is that these new members had chosen to remain and raise their own children in the city. Many of them, moreover, were active in shaping the city's "new economy" and brought to the congregation a sophisticated understanding of financial operations within the "non-profit sector," the rubric that overtook "voluntary associations" in the life of many established religious institutions.⁴⁰

Late Twentieth-century Renewal

In some respects the congregation's efforts to attract and hold new members in the 1980s and 1990s were reminiscent of its experience at the turn of the previous century, for what many members wanted was an institution that helped them reconnect with their Jewish identity and also with their city. As Central Synagogue's congregation reached just over 1300 members in 1987, Israel became increasingly prominent in its programs. Locally based "social action" programs addressed the problems



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of homelessness and AIDS, fields of hands-on community activism that followed upon Reform Judaism's participation in the Civil Rights movement. Looking for other ways to be "relevant" to members, trustees endorsed the Women's Focus in 1988, as well as new programs for adult education, social and business networking, or self-help. Some scholars of contemporary American religious life have suggested that an emphasis on personal fulfillment after 1970 privatized religious fellowship. Others have wondered whether social action came at the expense of a focus on worship. But these judgments, like those of scholars who see a contemporary decline in democratic associational life, are complicated, if not contradicted, by the history of an individual congregation.⁴¹

Against a backdrop of suburban flight and then gentrification, Central Synagogue refashioned its ethos of service, its methods of administration, and its philosophy of governance in order to maintain its congregational base. Like their peers in other cities, Central Synagogue's trustees tracked the reasons members left and conducted surveys in order to gain a better sense of members' needs and capacities. Such surveys are but one example of the turn of American congregations of all denominations to a market model for voluntary association that treats members as customers, in contrast to the nineteenth-century property model that viewed them as common proprietors. To a certain extent, this shift adhered in the very market-derived logic of preservation through growth, for members of large congregations can connect



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most easily through their particular interests (“niches”), though they may have more trouble making themselves known or heard to the congregation as a whole community.

Since the consumer or market model for voluntary associations carries with it the risks of passive, even indifferent, membership, in the 1990s Central Synagogue’s trustees took a leaf out of the book of innovative management tactics by promoting congregational participation in long-term planning.⁴² One of the challenges of strategic planning was deciding what commitments were core to Central Synagogue and what activities stretched the resources of the congregation too thin. Whereas in 1918, Central Synagogue’s by-laws listed eight committees and three main affiliate organizations, by the end of the twentieth century it had sixteen committees and six organizations or programs. In addition to the traditional committees that took responsibility for budget, membership, ritual, music, buildings, nominations, and the religious school (but no longer the cemetery), newer committees dealt with communications, development, the nursery school, youth activities, ushering, the library, the archives, social action, a breakfast program for homeless New Yorkers, and an annual Jethro Shabbat service on law. The temple’s sisterhood and brotherhood had been joined by the Senior Youth Group, Women’s Focus, and the Central Issues Group for members under the age of 35. And with expanded programs, staff, and membership—as well as inflation and synagogue renovation—came a budget that increased more than tenfold in the last third of the twentieth century.⁴³



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Professional administration made a difference in Central Synagogue's revival. Even a cursory examination of the archives of the recent era suggests that the congregation owes a debt of gratitude to Barry Kugel, the temple's Executive Director from 1967 to 1992, for skilled leadership through stressful fiscal times. Congregation presidents and trustees have also developed considerable budgetary skills and learned how to discuss the congregation's financial exigencies candidly with members. But there is also a touch of historical irony as American congregations in the late twentieth-century borrowed strategies for promotion, fundraising, and management from the world of business, for in the nineteenth century voluntary associations had themselves provided business with the model for corporate organization. Perhaps that particular irony is balanced by considering Central Synagogue's efforts to restore intimacy within a congregation of more than 1200 members⁴⁴: Central Connections, established in 2000, represents something of a revival of the nineteenth-century congregations' communal mission, and especially that of the Society of Righteous Ladies, to look after members' most basic spiritual and personal needs, especially in times of sickness, aging, and death.

The congregation has continued to overhaul nineteenth-century legacies in order to democratize governance. Through much of its history, Central Synagogue has been characterized by remarkably long tenures of service from rabbis, cantors, trustees, and congregational presidents, whose leadership provided personal as well as institutional continuity. In recent decades, members and trustees



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have encouraged wider participation in governance, including “term limits” for presidents and trustees, so that more members take responsibility for the collective enterprise. At the same time, as is true of more and more established American congregations, that enterprise rests on substantial institutional budgets that pay for the expanded administrative and rabbinical staffs that are crucial to meeting the congregation’s multiple spiritual, social, and personal expectations.

Looking back at the congregation’s experience of the second half of the twentieth century, it is hard not to be struck by the ways its twin commitments to innovation and tradition have produced the glue of continuity. Central Synagogue faced many contingencies arising from the city’s own volatile history. The congregation has aimed to find ways to maintain its relevance to new generations, not only as the center of their spiritual life or family well-being but as a means of connecting to and serving both the city and a larger Jewish community. Moreover, in the last decade, under Senior Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein, who became Central Synagogue’s spiritual leader in 1991, the congregation has heightened its attention to Israel. Congregational leaders have repeatedly weighed the desire for new programs that engage and commit members against the strains of overreaching. In a sense, the pressure of contributing to the city while looking after the congregation’s own institutional needs is best exemplified by Central Synagogue’s commitment to restoring and caring for—and even rebuilding—an aging city landmark, which has, consequently, become an



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unmatched symbol of the history of Reform Judaism in the United States. But here again, the synagogue succeeded in part by learning to operate on New York City's unusual playing field, raising money in the early 1980s, for example, by selling air rights to the community house.⁴⁵ In what was a harder decision, the congregation also demonstrated a clear-eyed willingness to adapt and set new priorities by divesting its cemetery in the mid 1990s. This, then, is a congregation that has survived by constantly assessing what to carry forward from its past and what to modify in order to lay a foundation for the future. It is against this backdrop that we turn to thinking about the many ways that Central Synagogue has told and celebrated its own history.



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Endnotes

¹Robert Putnam has perhaps received the most attention for his assessment of the decline in American voluntary associations in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Other scholars, however, have suggested that Putnam's portrait is overdrawn. See, for example, essays in *Patterns of Social Capital: Stability and Change in Historical Perspective*, Robert I. Rotberg, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²Two volumes of *American Congregations*, especially Vol. 2: *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) have set the agenda for future research in this area. Alan Silverstein, *Alternatives to Assimilation: The Response of Reform Judaism to American Culture, 1980-1930* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1994), chapter 1, also stresses the status of local congregations as voluntary associations.

³Andrew Dolkart, *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood* (New York: Central Synagogue, 2002). The best overview of Central Synagogue's own history remains the essay produced for the Jewish Historical Society by Malcolm H. Stern, "The Story of Central Synagogue," unpublished typescript in the Central Synagogue Archives [hereafter, CS Archives]. See also *Central Synagogue: 140 Years*, Stella F. Fuld, ed., (NY: Central Synagogue, 1979). Central Synagogue has retold its history in numerous printed programs; founding dates for its organizations are not always precise or easily reconciled from different sources.

⁴Abraham Karp, "Overview: The Synagogue in America-A Historical Typology," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, Jack Wertheimer, ed. (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5. To situate the congregations in the history of Reform Judaism, I have also relied on essays by Leon A. Jick, Jenna Weissman Joselit, and Jonathan Sarna in the Wertheimer collection, and on Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1992); Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Naomi Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830-1914* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1984); and Alexandra Sheket Korros and Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Synagogue History: A Bibliography and State of the Field Survey* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1988). The classic work on New York's Jewish congregations before 1860 is Hyman Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947).



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⁵My social profiles in this and the following paragraph are based on unsystematic sampling of names that appear in the Minutes of the Board of Trustees, anniversary programs, and a list of "New Members, 1927-1973," CS Archives.

⁶Leon A. Jick, "The Reform Synagogue," in Wertheimer, ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, 99, notes that research sponsored by the UAHC in 1931 found "equal proportions of temple members were of German parentage and East European parentage" in most large Reform congregations.

⁷Brooks Holifield, "Toward a History of American Congregations," in Wind and Lewis, eds., *American Congregations*, Vol. 2, 27. The large number of children and young adults in the early republic mean that one-fifth of the total population was quite substantial.

⁸See *Petition of Congregation Ahawath Chesed* and *Petition of Shaar Hashomayim* to the Supreme Court of New York, *In the Matter of the Consolidation of Congregation Ahawath Chesed and Shaar Hashomayim into a new religious corporation known as Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim*, August 16, 1898, CS Archives. These petitions also describe the assets, revenues and debts of each congregation at the time of merger.

⁹Peter Dobkin Hall, *The Organization of American Culture, 1700-1900: Private Institutions, Elites and the Origins of American Nationality* (New York: New York University: 1982), 94-114; Ronald E. Seavoy, *The Origins of the American Business Corporation, 1784-1855: Broadening the Concept of Public Service During Industrialization* (Westport, CT. : Greenwood Press, 1982).

¹⁰The sale of pews marked a departure from the eighteenth century assignment of pews and dues according to rank (determined by the trustees) and in this sense represented a form of "democratization," but Jonathan Sarna also notes that "the sale of pews in perpetuity" was "a practice well known in Europe." "Seating and the American Synagogue," *Religion in American History: A Reader*, John Butler and Harry S. Stout, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 401. On democratization, see also Holifield, "Toward a History of American Congregations," 36. The CS Archives contains numerous examples of deeds to pews for both congregations.



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- ¹¹Minutes of the General Meeting of Ahawath Chesed, July 30, 1865, CS Archives.
- ¹² Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 224.
- ¹³Financial Report of Ahawath Chesed, April 2, 1872-November 1, 1872, Minutes of the Board of Trustees, CS Archives. A copy of the "Subscription List for New Building, filed in "Landmarking of Sanctuary Building, Historical Information" in the Barry Kugel Administrative Papers, CS Archives, shows a total of sixty-two subscribers, pledging from \$100 to \$6,000; twenty-seven pledged more than \$1,000 (which was more than a year's salary for many middle-income families). See also "On New York," *The Israelite*, December 23, 1870, which reports that \$70,000 in pledges were "signed immediately."
- ¹⁴See Report of the Finance Commission, for example, April 15, 1865; and Financial Report, April 1, 1872 to November 1, 1872, Minutes of the Board of Trustees. The congregation (Minutes for the General Meeting of Ahawath Chesed, November 19, 1865) approved a starting salary of \$2,500 for its first rabbi, CS Archives. This is slightly less than that paid by contemporary congregations, but, as Alan Silverstein notes above the income of many salaried professionals of this era; *Alternatives to Assimilation*, 28.
- ¹⁵Rabbi Adolph Huebsch to the General Meeting, June 28, 1868; and Report of the Delegates to the Sabbath Convention, Minutes of the General Meeting, June 28, 1868, CS Archives. For the Protestant Sabbatarian movement in New York, see Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 254-56, 359.
- ¹⁶Stern, "The Story of Central Synagogue," usefully characterizes the doctrinal orientation of each rabbi, tendencies also discussed in the studies of Reform Judaism cited in footnote 4. The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, drawn up by fifteen Reform rabbis, including Rabbi Isaac Wise, called for the end of observance of customs and ceremonies that "are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization." For the text, see the Central Conference of American Rabbis, <http://www.ccarnet.org/platforms/pittsburgh.html>. Congregational deference to rabbis could never be taken for granted. As is noted by Daniel Soyer, compiler, "History of Central Synagogue," in *Guide to the Archives Central Synagogue* (1994) 2, the congregation resisted using Rabbi Moses's own *Union Prayer Book* for the high holidays until 1928, CS Archives.



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¹⁷*By-Laws of The Central Synagogue, 1918* (New York: 1918), CS Archives.

¹⁸“On New York,” *Israelite*, December 23, 1870, reprints Stein’s speech.

¹⁹On the changing rituals of funerals, see Arthur Goren, “Pageants of Sorrow, Celebration and Protest,” in *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 30-47.

²⁰Report of the School Committee, January 6, 1867, in Minutes of the General Meeting of Ahawath Chesed, January 6, 1867; Minutes of the Board of Trustees, November 10, 1872. CS Archives.

²¹Karp, “Overview,” 6, 9.

²²See, e.g., the Financial Reports of Shaar Hashomayim, Oct. 1, 1893-April 1, 1894, and January 1895, which list membership and accounts; Rabbi Solomon Sonnenschein to Secretary of the Congregation, n.d., calling attention to the 60th anniversary, “Early Shaar Hashomayim” Box, CS Archives.

²³Petition of Ahawath Chesed, August 16, 1898, *In Re Consolidation*; in Shaar Hashomayim’s petition, it was also noted that “many of the members have removed from the vicinity of its present place of worship to the neighborhood of the place of worship of Ahawath Chesed, and do not desire to go so great a distance for divine worship.” CS Archives.

²⁴On the precedent mergers and the dissent of Rabbi Davidson, see Stern, “The Story of Central Synagogue.” Resignation letters of members of Shaar Hashomayim can be found in the “Early Shaar Hashomayim” box, CS Archives.

²⁵On the general drop in religious activity after the Civil War, see Francis P. Weisenberger, *Ordeal of Faith: The Crisis of Church-going America, 1865-1900* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959); including a discussion of Rabbi Kohut’s debates with Rabbi Kaufman Kohler in the mid-1880s over the reach of Reform.

²⁶Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1909; New York: New American Library, 1961), chapter 6, reprinting her 1893 article. Rebekah Kohut’s autobiography, *My Portion* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1927), offers useful insights into how this daughter and wife of rabbis became a nationally prominent leader of women within Reform Judaism, but it is disappointingly terse on her relations to the Central Synagogue congregation. On Julia Richman, see Selma C. Berrol, *Julia Richman, A Notable Woman* (Philadelphia: The Balch Institute Press, 1993).



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²⁷Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City, 1887-1936, in *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspective*, Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna, eds. (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press/ University Press of New England, 2001), 148-181; Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Special Sphere of Middle-Class Jewish Women: The Synagogue Sisterhood, 1890-1940," in Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue*, 206-30. Herman dates the founding of Central Synagogue's sisterhood to 1889. The flow of contributions and the range of activities can be seen in the Day Book of the Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim Sisterhood, 1905-1911; accounts, 1912-1915 (checks, bills and receipts), and a printed booklet on the Junior Sisterhood of Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim, 1913, CS Archives.

²⁸*By-Laws of The Central Synagogue, 1918*, CS Archives.

²⁹Holifield, "Toward a History of American Congregations," 38-43.

³⁰Young Men's Association of Congregation Ahawath Chesed, Minute Book, 1887-1894, and programs of entertainment, 1889-1890; quotes from minutes, December 8, 1892, May 11, 1893, CS Archives.

³¹Printed Program, Sixtieth Anniversary of the Society of Righteous Women, 1850-1910; Minutes of Chebra Noschim Zidkonios, Jan. 14, 1903 (100 members); April 22, 1903 (need to "attract and interest....the younger element"), June 24, 1903 (discussion of ways to recruit more members), Oct. 27, 1904 (discussion and rejection of proposal to merge with the Auxiliary), and passim, 1902-1904 (difficulties getting members to visit the sick and serve at funerals), CS Archives.

³²Anonymous, Typescript of speech, c. 1934, reviewing the history of women's organizations, describes "our social service group" as "deprived of its settlement house by the formation of large city groups." See also Scrapbook, 1928-1931, of the Women's Organization of Central Synagogue, which includes a history of the Art Committee, CS Archives.

³³Karp, "Overview," 19-23.

³⁴Dolkart, *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood*, 43-45.

³⁵Daniel Kops, "Report of the Committee of Arrangements for the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of Central Synagogue," Minutes of the Board of Trustees, October, 1922; Program for Pageant "Judaism: An Historic Review," Jan. 29, 1922, in Seventy-fifth Anniversary file, CS Archives.



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³⁶On Stephen Wise's participation in the movement to follow mainline Christian congregations in adopting "unassigned" seating and general dues, see Sarna, "Seating and the American Synagogue," 403-407. Although Central Synagogue's members continued to claim specific pews, concepts of ownership were blurring. Apparently aiming to pick up on the Free Synagogue movement, during a 1904 membership campaign, Daniel Richman, Secretary to the Trustees, informed prospective members that "for a *short time only*" the board would "issue FREE to new elected members DEEDS to the pews they select." Moreover, since renters were to be charged the same dues as owners, they were advised to become members. See Letter from Daniel Richman, Secretary, May 31, 1904, CS Archives. The surviving cards from a 1936 survey of members carefully records the location of their pews.

³⁷Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Central Synagogue, September 10, October 14, 1936 (comptroller); Nov. 18, December 16, 1937 (writing off dues; accepting resignations); October 14, December 12, 1937 (Rabbi Wise on committees); "Supplementary Cash Statement: Temple Dues Outstanding, 1933-1938," March 3, 1938. See also "Lists of New Members, 1927-1974," CS Archives.

³⁸Central Synagogue was designated a New York (City) Community Trust Landmark in 1957, a New York State Landmark in 1966, United States National Historic Site in 1970, National Historic Landmark in 1975; Anne Mininberg, "Time Line for Docents," November, 1999, CS Archives. In 1976, the Church of the Holy Communion left its 1846 locally-landmarked building on West 20th Street, which, despite protests from the Episcopal Church, was sold in 1983 to Peter Gatien, who opened the Limelight nightclub in the church. David Dunlap, "Nightclub to Reopen in Gothic Church," *New York Times*, May 27, 1998, B-8. Although committed to preservation, Central Synagogue had itself to remove three 1870s town houses to build its Community House; see Christopher Gray, "Streetscapes: East 55th Street Between Park and Lexington Avenues," *New York Times*, December 27, 1998, 11-5.

³⁹The exhibit and catalog, New-York Historical Society, *City of Promise: Aspects of Jewish Life in New York, 1654-1970* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1970), reflected not only the long-standing commitment of former congregation president Herbert Schwarz to preserving Central Synagogue's history but also the production values of publisher Harry N. Abrams, renown for his art books. *Central Synagogue: 140 Years* was dedicated to Abrams.



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⁴⁰Peter Dobkin Hall, "A Historical Overview of the Private Nonprofit Sector," in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, Walter W. Powell, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁴¹The essays and footnotes in *American Congregations: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations* convey these different critical perspectives. Holifield, "Toward a History of American Congregations," 43-46 notes that what he calls the large "participatory congregations" of the post-war era run the risk of becoming a "group of groups, and its members tend to be active in only a select number." Karp, "Overview," 28 characterizes the contemporary synagogue as oriented to the "service of the individual."

⁴²See Samuel Wasserman, "From the President," *Central Synagogue Bulletin* Vol. 55, No. 10 (June, 2001), 2.

⁴³*Guide to the Archives*, 4, places the annual budget at \$4 million. For the most recent listing of committees, see the pamphlet, "Central Synagogue: Become Involved-Join a Committee," (2001), CS Archives.

⁴⁴As of 2002, the membership is 1800 families.

⁴⁵Shawn G. Kennedy, "35-Story Midblock Tower," *New York Times*, June 19, 1983, 8-1. The windfall from air rights seems to be the Manhattan real estate market's vindication of nineteenth-century institutions that just stayed put: Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church at 55th and Fifth received \$15 million in air rights in the late 1980s; Richard D. Lyons, "Preservation Battle Ends in Manhattan," *New York Times*, March 7, 1990, D-18. See also David W. Dunlap, "Using Thin Air to Let Buildings Grow Taller," *New York Times*, May 17, 1998, 11-1.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

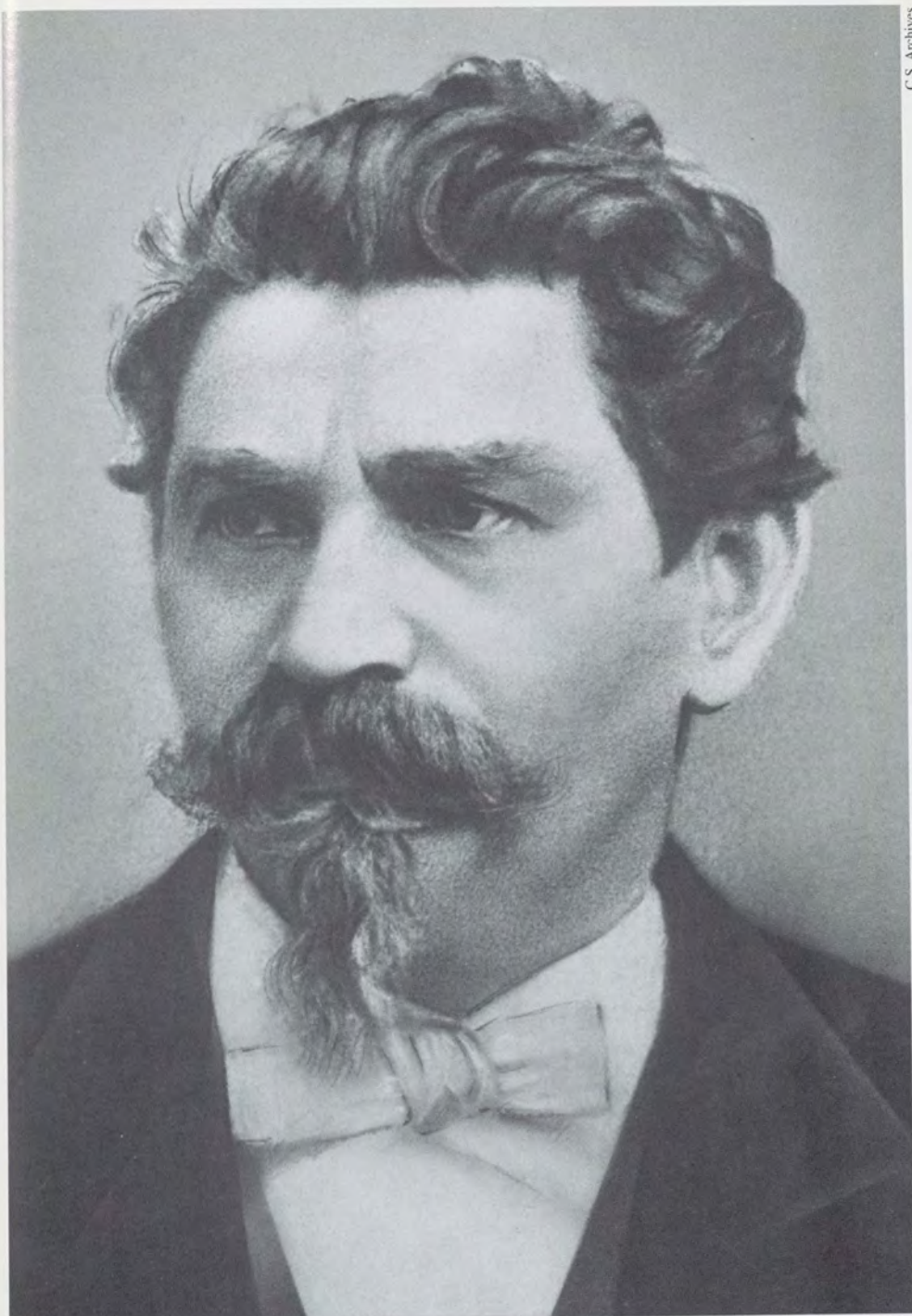
Elizabeth Blackmar is Professor of History at Columbia University. She is the author of *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850*, Cornell University Press 1991 and co-author, with Roy Rosenzweig, of the *Park and the People: A History of Central Park*, Cornell University Press 1998.





The following selection of photographs, predominantly from Central Synagogue's own Archives, gives visual context to these two engaging and informative essays.

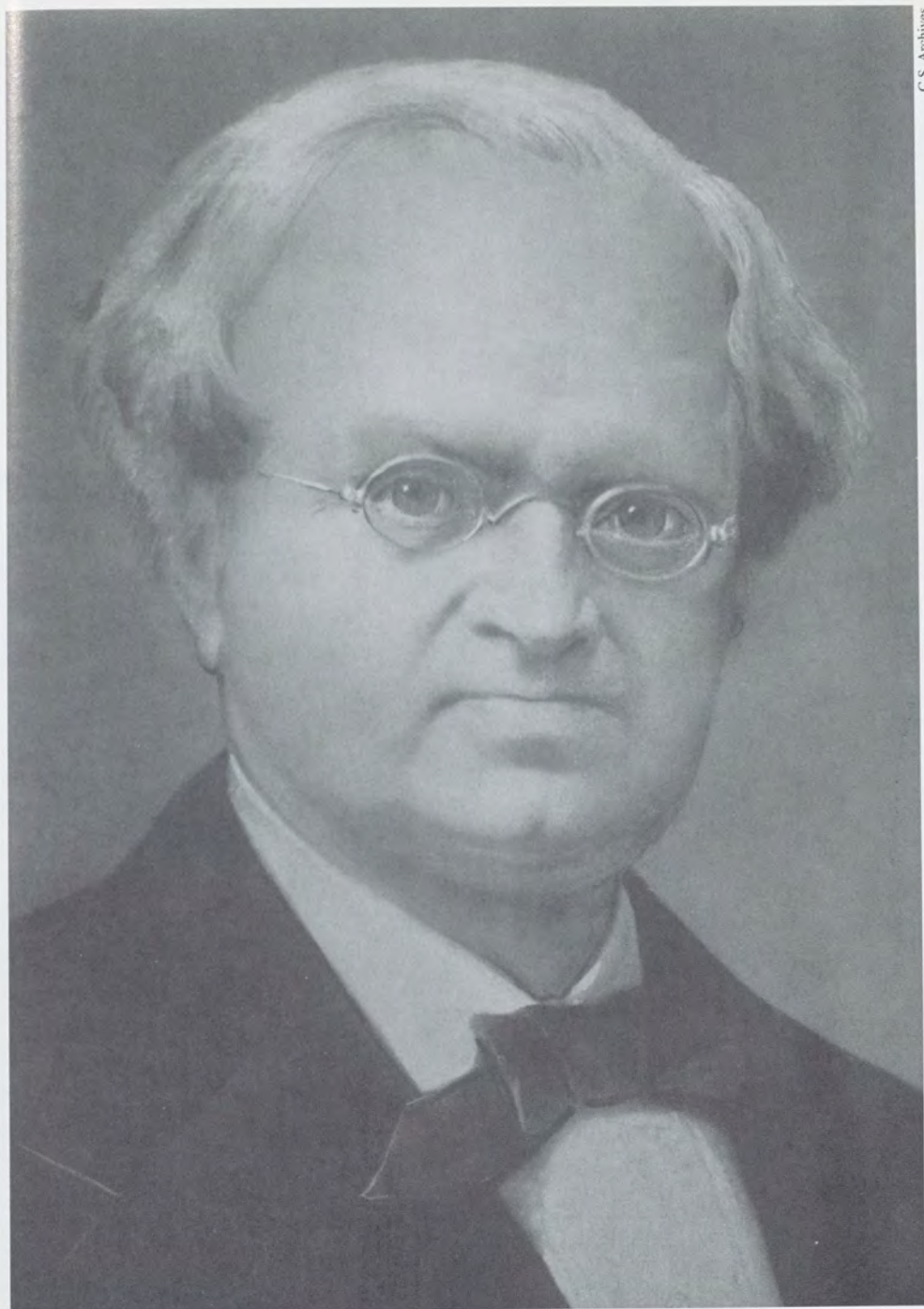




Rabbi Adolph Huebsch, first rabbi (1866-1885) of Congregation Ahawath Chesed. He presided at the consecration of the new sanctuary building in 1872.



Rabbi Alexander Kohut, second rabbi (1885-1893) of Congregation Ahawath Chesed.



Ignatz Stein, President (1850-1873) of Congregation Ahawath Chesed. He spoke at both the laying of the cornerstone (1870) and the consecration (1872) ceremonies of the sanctuary building.



Linden Hill Cemetery Gate, photograph taken 1922.



Photo: Underwood and Underwood, C.S. Archives

REBECCA KOHUT, second wife of Rabbi Alexander Kohut. She was an organizer of Ahawath Chesed's "Sisterhood of Personal Service".



Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim Ladies Monday Sewing group, circa 1916. This group made more than 550 garments for social services.



Rabbi Jonah Bondi Wise, rabbi of Central Synagogue, (1926-1959).



C.S. Archives

Rabbi Jonah Bondi Wise officiating at a tree-planting in front of the Community House at 35 East 62nd Street, 1954. The students are members of the religious school choir.



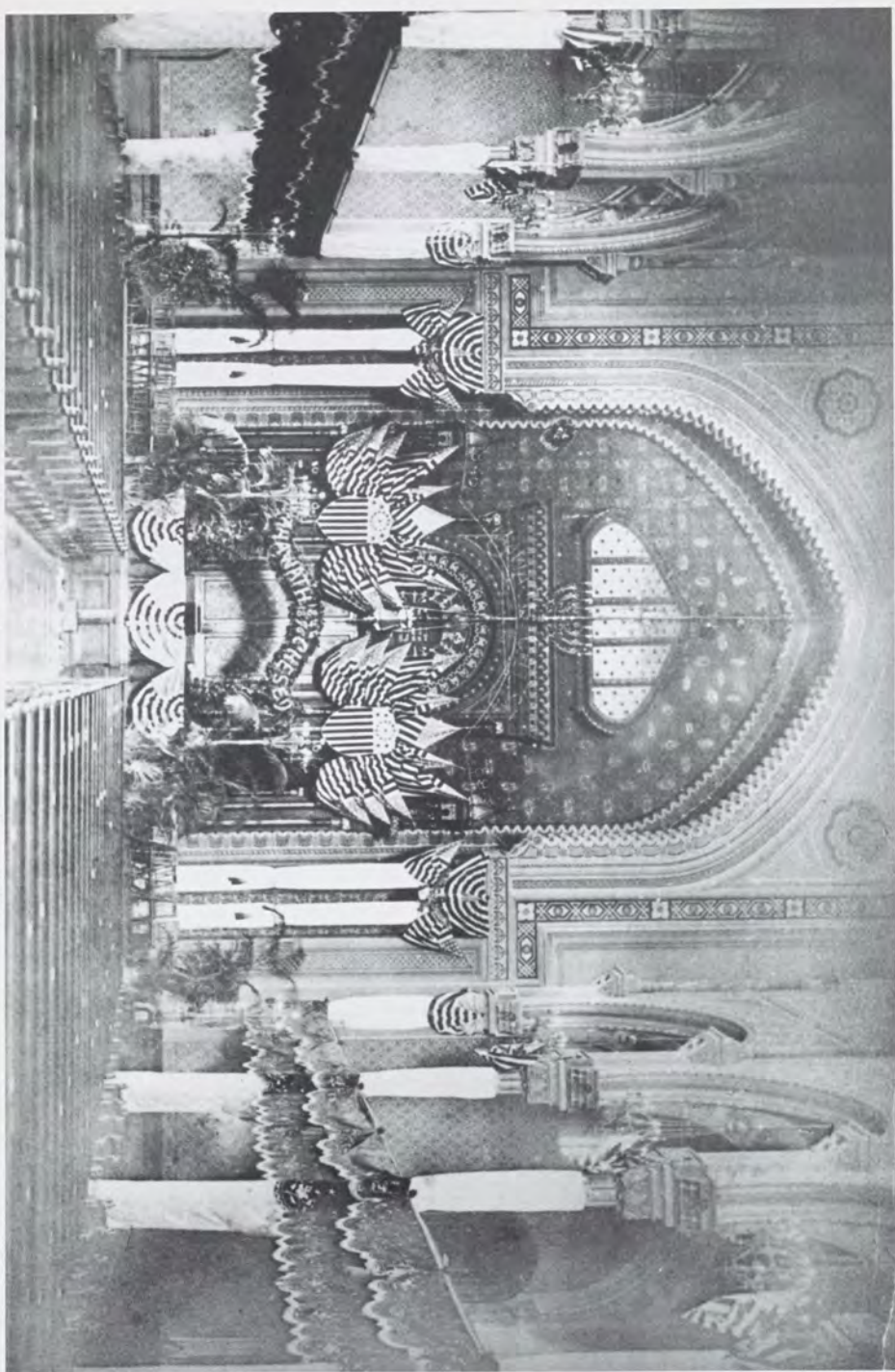
Left: Rabbi Jonah B. Wise; right: Rabbi Dr. David J. Seligson, leading a congregational Passover Seder, 1950s.



Barry Kugel, Executive Director of Central Synagogue, 1967-1992.



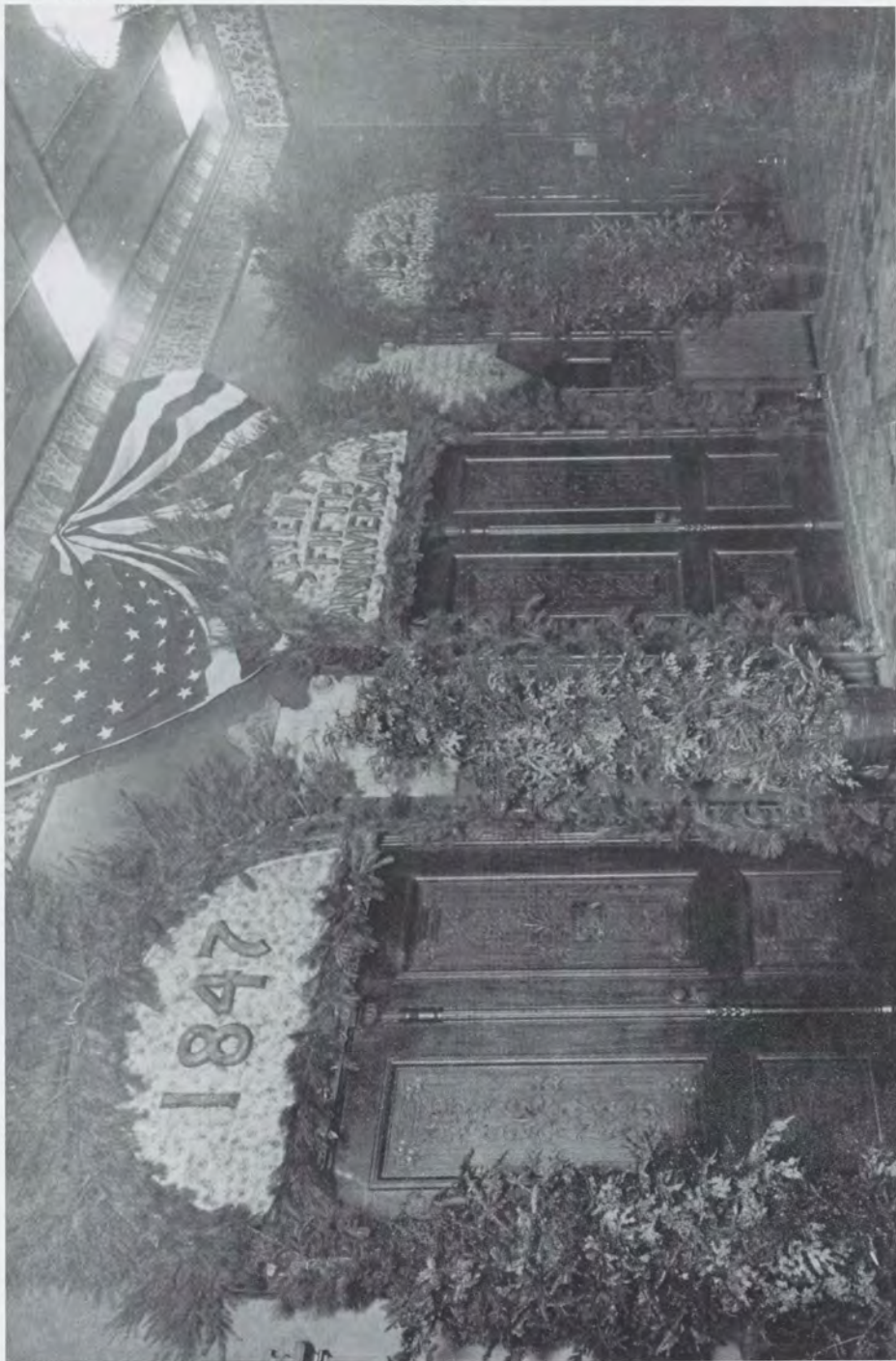
View of a service in the sanctuary of Central Synagogue, 1970s.



Sanctuary decorated for Ahawath Chesed's 50th Anniversary celebration, 1896



C.S. Archives



The foyer of Central Synagogue in 1922 decorated for the 75th Anniversary celebration of the founding of Ahawath Chesed.



Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, speaker at the ceremonies of both the laying of the cornerstone (1870) and the consecration (1872) of the sanctuary building.



1942 Maccabean Rally in Central Synagogue's sanctuary. Twenty-eight congregations of the metropolitan area participated; each one carried its own service flag and an American flag.



Succoth celebration with religious school students. Rabbi Dr. David J. Seligson is blessing the challah, 1946.



Photo: Al Levine, C.S. Archives

Carrying torahs from the main sanctuary building to the new sanctuary, Bier Chapel, in the Community House, 1967. Accompanying Rabbi Dr. David J. Seligson (left) is L-R: Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller; Congregation President, Matthew Ross; Cantor Frederick Lechner, Judge Stanley Fuld and Assistant Rabbi Louis Bogage.





Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein leading the procession on Lexington Avenue for the consecration ceremony on September 9, 2001. He is accompanied by: left, Mayor of New York, Rudolph Guiliani, right, Cardinal Edward Egan, and Governor of New York, George Pataki.

Photo: Esto Photographers/Peter Mauss



Photo: Stuart Fersht, C.S. Archives

Shofar blowers at consecration ceremony, September 9, 2001.





PUBLIC CEREMONIES
DEFINING
CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE

BY
ARTHUR A. GOREN





Public Ceremonies Defining Central Synagogue

Introduction

Glancing even in a cursory fashion at Central Synagogue's historical timeline one is struck by the congregation's penchant for celebrating anniversaries. In November 1896, Ahawath Chesed (later Central Synagogue) marked the 50th anniversary of its founding on the Lower East Side. In 1922, 1927, 1936 and 1946, the congregation celebrated the 75th, 80th, 90th and 100th anniversary of its beginnings. The congregation commemorated other historical events as well. In 1970 it celebrated the centennial of the laying of the cornerstone of the present synagogue building. (Five years later the building was designated a National Historic Landmark.) Then in 1979, Central Synagogue marked the 140th anniversary of Shaar Hashomayim's beginnings, the congregation which in 1898 merged with Ahawath Chesed. As if to make amends for the belated recognition of its older but smaller sister congregation, ten years later Central Synagogue marked the 150th anniversary of Shaar Hashomayim's founding, and in 1998 observed the centennial of the amalgamation of the two. Thus the congregation could claim priority of historical place over such venerable congregations as Rodeph Sholom and Emanu-El. Most recently, on September 9, 2001, the congregation rededicated its restored temple three years after fire had nearly destroyed it.¹

These festivities were elaborate affairs, carefully arranged and lavishly executed. The trustees appointed special committees to plan the various aspects of the celebrations. Reports were submitted,



Public Ceremonies Defining Central Synagogue

debated and amended. The congregation's leaders aided by their rabbis, cantors and administrators shaped the form and content of the events and activated the congregation's affiliates, its brotherhood, sisterhood, religious school and youth groups. Histories of the congregation were commissioned for the occasions, hymns composed for the celebratory services, exhibitions mounted, and prominent figures invited to address special convocations and banquets. The celebrations, designed to strengthen congregational pride and loyalty and to attract new members, also spoke to the Jewish community at large and to the wider public. Extensive coverage in the Anglo-Jewish weeklies and in the daily press represented the public recognition the congregation sought. In later years, especially epitomized by the 90th anniversary festivities held in the fall of 1936, these events became more imposing, lasted for weeks, and provided a platform to address the American people, a reflection of the congregation's self-image as a significant voice in the city's and nation's spiritual and cultural life.

How shall we understand this historical sensibility? What purposes did these celebrations serve? How distinctive was Central Synagogue's engrossment with its origins, and what can one learn from the changing form and content of the commemorations? The laying of the cornerstone of the Ahawath Chesed edifice and the consecration of the completed building sixteen months later created a sense of great historic moment, a coming of age. They are the appropriate places to begin a consideration of the role of public ceremonials in forging a religious fellowship.



Public Ceremonies Defining Central Synagogue

Foundation Festivities

On Wednesday, December 14, 1870, five to six hundred persons gathered at the corner of Lexington Avenue and Fifty-fifth Street for the first of the founding ceremonies. The formalities began with the sounding of a bugle at 10:30 A.M. as the principals mounted the rostrum on the temporary platform overlooking the excavation where the cornerstone would be laid; a choir and large orchestra were seated on an extension of the platform. In addition to the congregation's rabbi, Adolph Huebsch, the president, Ignatz Stein, the trustees, and the guest orator, Isaac Mayer Wise, rabbi of Cincinnati's Congregation B'nai Yeshurun ("Plum Street Temple"), nearly all the presidents and rabbis of New York's congregations were present. The list of invitees included the mayor, comptroller, sheriff, county clerk, superintendent of police, and the county judges "as well as others deemed worthy" by the officers of the congregation. Which notables came is unclear, but the *Times* reported that "not only persons of the Jewish faith" also attended "but many Christians, among them Judge [Michael] Connolly and members of the Municipal Government."²

Stein, president of the congregation for twenty-one years who had risen from cigar maker to a small clothing manufacturer, introduced the proceedings with a sketch of the twenty-three year history of the congregation. In 1846 a handful of Bohemian immigrants gathered in temporary quarters on Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side to worship on the high holidays.³ The "revolutionary year of 1848" brought a spurt in immigration and an



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increase in membership. Formal organization followed with the adoption of a constitution and the obtaining of a charter. Stein chronicled the congregation's steady growth and noted the highlights: the purchase of a torah scroll, the acquisition of cemetery land, the struggle to raise funds to procure larger and more permanent quarters, the moves uptown, the election in 1866 of Adolph Huebsch as rabbi and Samuel Welch as cantor, both brought from Prague by the congregation, and finally the purchase of the land for the temple whose construction was about to begin. His history focused on geography, mobility both physical and social (purchasing and refurbishing three successive dwellings between 1849 and 1864), and the generosity and devotion of the members who were eager to achieve respectability in their adopted home, New York. Building a majestic sanctuary for their faith in the sedate middle-class neighborhood of mid Manhattan fit the social status to which they aspired; designing the synagogue in the elaborate and exotic "Moorish style" and locating it on a main avenue proudly highlighted their Jewish identity. This juxtaposition of integrationist intent (the reformist trend of the congregation and the rapid migration uptown), with ethno-religious sentiments (the use of German in the liturgy and the recruitment of their ministers from Bohemia), reflected the emerging ambience.⁴

Following Stein's address, choir and orchestra rendered verses from Psalm 118, part of the hallel prayer recited on the New Hebrew month and on holidays. The Psalmist's allegory of Israel



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as the “the stone which the builders rejected,” now chosen by God to be “the head stone [rosh pina] of the corner,” becomes the metaphor for laying the cornerstone of the temple they have begun to build. The chairman of the building committee then presented the rabbi with an engraved silver trowel bestowing upon him the honor of “laying the stone.” The ritual included depositing a copper container in a niche hollowed out on the surface of the lower half of the stone. The capsule contained “the customary documents”: a history of the United States and the history of the congregation, the constitution of the United States and the constitution of the congregation, lists of the names of the trustees, the building committee, members, the program of the ceremony, coins, we are told, from one cent to five dollars, and copies of the daily papers and the Jewish weeklies. Once the container was positioned, the rabbi laid the mortar, and the upper stone was lowered into place. All this occurred while the choir sang the refrain *Ono adonai* -“grant us God”— followed by hymns in German and English and Huebsch’s response to the honor bestowed upon him.⁵

Ordained as an Orthodox rabbi from the Yeshiva in Pecs, Hungary and holder of a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Prague, Huebsch preached in German. He took his text from the Book of Haggai where the prophet addresses the Israelites who have returned from Babylonian exile and have gathered in Jerusalem to participate in the cornerstone laying of the second temple. Among the assembled, some remembered the



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glory of the first temple and were dispirited by the sluggish efforts in building the second. The reverse was true for those who had gathered at Lexington Avenue and 55th Street, Huebsch declared. Most of those present recalled the congregation's makeshift first houses of prayer as they were witnessing the foundations being laid for the splendid temple soon to rise. However, the celebration, Huebsch exhorted, was not only in honor of the congregation's accomplishments. It was "for all the Jewish inhabitants of this great metropolis of New York." Indeed, "the house of God in Israel has in our days also a representative meaning to the outer world" (Huebsch's emphasis). The true significance of the event, he concluded, was that it heralded "a new and brilliant epoch in the development of our creed."⁶ The notion of a "new epoch"—Jews flourishing under the American "sun of freedom,"—transformed the event into a civic ritual of affirmation and self-definition. Wise then delivered the main address in English.

Arriving in New York from Bohemia in 1846, Wise was well acquainted with the handful of small German-speaking congregations in the city. Eager to become American and to Americanize Judaism and unable to find a satisfactory congregational post, he moved on to Albany before being called to Cincinnati's B'nai Yeshurun in 1854 where he remained for the rest of his life. An early pioneer of Reform Judaism, publisher of the nationally circulated weekly, the *Israelite*, Wise traveled widely to promote the establishment of a union of liberal synagogues. A scant six years before the 1870 ceremony he had addressed Ahawath Chesed on



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the occasion of the consecration of the sanctuary it was presently using, a converted church, on Avenue C and 4th Street. (Interestingly, in his report of the event in the *Israelite*, Wise praised the congregation for retaining the organ and the family pews of the church, and for using a trained choir in the services — all hallmarks of moderate reform — but he chided the congregation for not going far enough. Abiding by the synagogue practices of Prague, he contended, was neither “practical” nor “desirable.”)⁷ In 1868, Wise returned to New York to speak at the consecration of Temple Emanu-El’s majestic new sanctuary on 5th Avenue and 43rd Street. His Cincinnati congregation had recently moved into its own grandiose edifice, at Plum Street and Eight Street, a temple built in the same Moorish style as Emanu-El. Given Wise’s eminence and influence, Cincinnati’s B’nai Yeshurun ceremonials, like its architecture, surely influenced Ahawath Chesed’s celebrations. Thus the details of the Plum Street temple’s corner-stone laying ceremony, which took place in May, 1865, and the consecration of the completed building in August, 1866, are of particular interest.⁸

In Cincinnati, the cornerstone laying event began with a procession that formed at the old synagogue and proceeded to the new site accompanied by a band with banners unfurled. Children of the religious school, representatives of the other Jewish congregations, the Mayor, the City Council, judges and Christian clergymen were in the line of march. The five oldest members of the congregation carried three silver goblets containing oil, wine and



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corn, a silver trowel (ceremonial objects associated with the Masonic ritual), a Bible and the American flag. In the case of Ahawath Chesed's ceremony the distance of nearly three miles from 4th Street and Avenue C to 55th Street and Lexington Avenue and the weekday traffic may have precluded a march, and no mention is made of goblets of oil, wine and corn [sic]. At the Plum Street site, following the singing of several hymns by a superbly trained choir, the chairman of the building committee read a history of the congregation. He was handed the silver trowel and assisted by the five elders, he "laid the stone" which included a capsule that contained nearly the same items as the Ahawath Chesed time capsule.⁹

The heart of the consecration service consisted of a procession of the congregation's worthies carrying the torah scrolls into the new building and placing them in the ark. In Cincinnati at Wise's temple the procession had begun at the old synagogue. It filed into the sanctuary and circled the reader's platform and pulpit. In the traditional service, the procession made seven circuits (*hakafot*) while prescribed psalms were chanted and different congregants were honored with carrying the scrolls before they were placed in the ark, the eternal lamp was lit, and the rabbi delivered the dedicatory sermon. Reformist synagogues reduced the number of circuits to three but added to the pageantry in other ways. Both at B'nai Yeshurun and Ahawath Chesed, at the synagogue door, the chairman of the building committee presented the keys of the building to the president of the congregation. Children



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were given a prominent role. In the Plum Street ceremony “young boys carried the curtains [for the ark] and covers and mantles [for the scrolls], and young girls the flowers for decorations.” At the entrance to Ahawath Chesed, following Huebsch’s consecration prayer, “one hundred little boys and girls paraded by the Rev. Drs. Huebsch and [James K.] Gutheim,” the *Israelite* reported, “and the officers of the congregation, bearing the Scrolls of the Law, marched up the nave to the chanting of Psalm 24 by the Cantor, Rev. Samuel Welch, assisted by a remarkably fine choir and a double orchestra of string instruments.” After the scrolls were placed in the ark and “a German hymn was sung written expressly for the occasion,” Huebsch delivered the consecration sermon in German on the “requirements of an American Jewish house of worship.” Following the Sabbath evening service, “a special hymn for the occasion in English” was sung and the guest rabbi, “Rev. Dr. J. R. Gutheim,” spoke in English on “the Jewish faith as it existed at the times of the patriarchs and prophets, and its changed relations at the present time.” Huebsch’s and Gutheim’s orations were paeans to America as the promised land of freedom and progress where a Judaism in consonance with the times would flourish.¹⁰

Celebrating Identity

The foundation rites of Ahawath Chesed were not fixed in Jewish religious law or in Jewish custom.¹¹ True, similar ceremonies were in vogue in Europe during the middle decades of the



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19th century in conjunction with the dedication of the great central synagogues built in Vienna, Berlin, Budapest and Warsaw. But the foundation rites of Ahawath Chesed, B'nai Yeshurun and other American synagogues were American Jewish composites. The ritual performances wove together the use of Jewish religious objects (the sacred place accorded to the Torah scrolls), biblical metaphor (scriptural passages relating to the temple), a liturgy collated from thanksgiving prayers recited on holidays, and the sermon (an affirmation of an American Judaism). They leaned heavily on American civic ceremonials, particularly groundbreaking rituals. The cornerstone laying ceremonies for government buildings, churches, and charitable and educational institutions were important civic events and shared common features. They usually began with a procession of political figures, community leaders, interested onlookers, and the patrons and members of the host institution.¹² On these occasions, notables speaking for the individual organization declared the institution's devotion to nation, city and neighborhood. In turn it was honored by the presence of public officials and won recognition through the detailed and favorable reports in the press. In this shared public culture, history served as the medium for proclaiming America's ideals as well as the significance of the congregation's, lodge's or ethnic group's undertaking. Reciting the history of the institution and depositing it in the time capsule together with other historical artifacts, as in the Ahawath Chesed ritual, were features of most foundation rites. Thus the choice of items reflected, on the one



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hand, a shared American patriotism (the federal and state constitutions, the names of the highest officers of the union, state and city, the daily papers), and, on the other hand, the institution's particularity. In the latter respect, it is interesting to compare the contents of Ahawath Chesed's time capsule with that of the venerable Shearith Israel congregation, New York's oldest synagogue, which had retained the Sephardic ritual from colonial times. In 1859, at the cornerstone laying ceremony for its 19th Street site, a Hebrew prayer book and Bible, a marriage contract, phylacteries, mezuzah, "vials containing holy earth from Jerusalem, stone from the western wall and foundation of the Temple," and other religious artifacts were placed in the capsule in addition to the venerated state papers and congregation documents, lists of national and congregational leaders, and a history of the synagogue. In the Ahawath Chesed case, the equivalent articles of Jewish significance were the congregation's history, its constitution, and the contemporary Anglo-Jewish weeklies.¹³

The objects enshrined in the cornerstone were ostensibly for the edification of a future generation. More pertinent for the founders themselves was the compulsion to celebrate their own history now no matter how slight it was. (In 1870, only two other synagogues in New York aside from Shearith Israel could claim a history of forty years or more.)¹⁴ Two explanations are plausible for this historical awareness implanted so early and so evident in the later annals of Central Synagogue.

The first pertains to the evolving ideology of a nascent



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Reform Judaism that appealed to the recent, upwardly mobile arrivals. Jews in America, freed from traditions' impediments and delivered from Europe's constrictions, sought an American underpinning for their Jewish association. Ignatz Stein's brief but deeply-felt history of Ahawath Chesed and Adolph Huebsch's "a new epoch" for Judaism went hand in hand.

A second explanation draws upon the broader American context: the nation's continuous need to invent and reinvent a collective identity through symbols, ceremonies and celebrations. Recently, historians have given much thought to the construction of communal observances like Washington's Birthday, Independence Day, Memorial Day and tributes paid to national heroes (on the deaths of presidents in particular). Following the Civil War, these parades and pageants expanded in scope. The participation of religious and ethnic associations became more visible. The Irish and the Germans were especially prominent. A case in point is the homage New York paid to Lincoln when his funeral train arrived in the city en route to Springfield, Illinois. A massive procession accompanied Lincoln's hearse from City Hall to the Hudson River railroad depot. The *Times* noted that an entire "division" consisted of Irish organizations. The *Jewish Messenger* proudly estimated that "probably five thousand Israelites" representing the B'nai B'rith, Free Sons of Israel and other Jewish fraternal orders paraded *en bloc* in "the 4th division," and eleven synagogue delegations (Ahawath Chesed among them) and eight welfare and cultural societies marched in a separate formation



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from Shearith Israel to the memorial services at Union Square. A decade later, the committee planning the centennial exposition of American independence set aside “days” for religious and ethnic groups to make their public contributions to the festivities. (The exposition opened in Philadelphia in May 1876.) In the name of American Jewry, B’nai B’rith accepted the invitation, one of six groups to do so. The Order commissioned a monument to be erected on the exhibition grounds, a sculpture symbolizing the theme of “religious liberty.” The classical iconography of the statue, created by the Virginia-born American Jewish sculptor, Moses Ezekiel, had nothing Jewish about it, but it displayed the republican ideal the Jews held most sacrosanct, and it spoke to Jewish pride in this most public of American occasions.¹⁵

Thus Ahawath Chesed’s early decades in its permanent home belonged to a time when America and America’s diverse population were caught up in celebrating anniversaries. On a local level, patriotic societies commemorated Revolutionary War battles and unveiled statues of Civil War heroes; cities observed the bicentennials or centennials of their founding; and churches marked the anniversaries of their establishment. In uptown Jewish New York—figuratively an ocean away from downtown’s Yiddish-speaking East European immigrants—Temple Emanu-El celebrated its golden jubilee in April 1895; Ahawath Chesed in November 1896; Temple Israel of Harlem the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding and the tenth anniversary of the dedication of its present temple in May 1898. To these anniversaries



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one should add the dedicatory celebrations of the continually relocating synagogues. The consecration of Anshe Chesed at 63rd Street and Lexington Avenue in September 1873, B'nai Jeshurun at 65th Street and Madison in March 1885, Temple Beth El at 76th Street and 5th Avenue in September 1891, and Shearith Israel at 70th Street and Central Park West in May 1897 (its fifth synagogue building), are four among a score of such occasions. On the whole, these celebrations were internal congregational affairs. Nevertheless they were newsworthy and received detailed and laudatory coverage in the daily press and Anglo-Jewish weeklies. The celebrations usually lasted three days, beginning with the Friday evening services and concluding on Sunday, which was devoted to performances by the religious school students. The jubilee festivities were occasions for taking stock, reasserting the Judaism espoused by the congregation, and a self-congratulatory updating of the institution's history, the latter delivered by the congregation's president. Ahawath Chesed invited the city's two leading Reform rabbis to deliver the main sermons, English-speaking Gustav Gottheil of Emanu-El, and German-speaking Kaufmann Kohler of Beth El. The *Times* described the "elaborately decorated" temple: "maroon velvet and gold, and silk American flags draped on every pillar... [And] on the sides of the pulpit folds of the flags held in the talons of gilt eagles;" over the alter an "illuminated arch of crescent with the name of the church[sic] and the dates 1846-1896 formed in electric lights."¹⁶



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Anniversaries and their Agendas

More than a generation separated the fiftieth jubilee and the 90th anniversary celebration. During most of those years, the congregation faced the social and financial strains of a changing neighborhood and static membership. From the archival records, Elizabeth Blackmar and Andrew Dolkart have described Ahawath Chesed's efforts to cope with the vicissitudes of social and cultural inertia: merging with Shaar Hashomayim, completing the transition to an English language institution, replacing the congregation's hyphenated, "foreign" name with "Central Synagogue," introducing programs of social service and adult education, offering a place for women in the governance of the congregation, and most decisively, establishing a community house in 1926 to reach out to the younger generation. That year Rabbi Jonah Bondi Wise began his long and forceful ministry, which ended with his death in 1959.

The 1936 anniversary, the 90th, fell in the midst of increasing anxieties. At home, an aggressive, vocal antisemitism that went beyond the endemic prejudices upwardly mobile Jews encountered was a source of profound concern. Charles Coughlin, the radio priest whose Sunday coast-to-coast broadcasts became more stridently anti-Jewish as the 1930s progressed, was only one of the disturbing voices. In the city itself a growing anti-Jewish militancy spilled over into threatening demonstrations. Nearby Yorkville had its branches of the Friends of the New Germany, the predecessor of the German-American *Bund*. In the presidential cam-



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paign of 1936, Coughlin joined with Gerald L.K. Smith, an avowed anti-Semite, to support the third-party candidacy of William Lemke. The Spanish Civil War, which erupted that summer, added fuel to charges, particularly in Catholic circles, that Jews were aligned with world communism in their support of the Spanish left-wing government's struggle against Franco's insurgents. In fact, old-line, uptown Jews found the boisterous Jewish left and a growing Zionist stridency further endangering their own uncertain standing among their social peers. Most unnerving of all, was the escalating persecution of Germany's Jews.¹⁷

Hitler's rise to power, his systematic ejection of Germany's Jews from the economy, schools and universities, the book-burning orgies, the street violence, and the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, intensified the anxieties of America's Jews. Central Synagogue, in addition, had a personal connection with the unfolding events in Germany through its rabbi. In 1930, Jonah Wise agreed to serve as national chairman of the fund raising campaign of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the most important agency for alleviating the needs of Europe's Jews, a post he held until 1949. (In March 1933, the JDC dispatched Wise to Germany to study conditions and consult with German Jewry's leaders, an indication of the key position he held among Jewish communal policy-makers.) This is the context for revisiting the 90th anniversary celebration.¹⁸

The extraordinary calendar of events scheduled to begin in October 1936 and extend to the end of the year reflected the



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ambition and flair of the lay leaders and the harmony in outlook and temper between them and their rabbi. Preparations began in early spring when the trustees appointed an array of committees: to plan the public forums, concerts, radio programs, the publication of a history of the congregation, a public relations campaign, and the penultimate anniversary banquet. In addition to a coordinating committee chaired by Edmund Waterman, a lawyer and a rising figure in intergroup relations work, the trustees hired Leo W. Schwarz, an educator and writer, to assist Waterman. In July, Schwarz submitted his summary of the coordinating committee's recommendations and a tentative calendar, even "weight-listing" proposed speakers. Especially significant was the choice of a theme. An early proposal, "the spirit of American freedom and generosity," was replaced with, "We Americans." A special subcommittee had consulted with Edward L. Bernays, the famous public relations counselor, and with George E. Sokolsky, the well-known journalist and a member of the congregation. Both endorsed, "We Americans," as an appropriate rallying call. Bernays expressed his approbation for the further suggestion of a series of coast-to-coast radio broadcasts by "outstanding personalities in American life" who would discuss aspects of the subject.¹⁹

Trite as the theme was, the grounds for the choice are not. In his report to the trustees, Waterman explained:

Let me begin with a word about the aims of our program. Perhaps it can be best summarized by saying that we are going to utilize the occasion of our 90th Anniversary not



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only to demonstrate the prominent part that our institution and our rabbi play in American Jewish life, but above all, to restate the meaning of American democracy. We consider this the inescapable duty of every citizen in these turbulent times. . . . In the last analysis, the fate of the Jew, like that of every individual in every minority in this country, depends upon the fate of our country as a whole. In this way, we, as Jews, will be recontributing [sic] to America the opportunities and privileges which America has afforded us.²⁰

The anniversary theme concealed an understandable insecurity and defensiveness and a search for ways to assert the synagogue's commitment to strengthening America's values. Interestingly, at the same meeting the anniversary committee adopted "We Americans" as the theme, it approved a proposal to collaborate with the National Education Association in publishing a biography of Horace Mann on the occasion of the centennial year of his birth. The grounds for doing so were the importance of public education for a democracy, Mann's legacy. The committee also agreed to host the opening of the Horace Mann Centennial of New York City for educators and teachers. On December 13, 1936 the opening took place at Central Synagogue with an attendance of 800. Frank Kingdon, a Methodist minister and president of the University of Newark and William H. Kilpatrick, the eminent professor of education at Teachers College, spoke on "The Place of Education in Democracy."²¹

The range of interest and the level of cultural sophistication of



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the anniversary organizers are apparent when one considers the concert of American music, which was held on October 12, 1936 at the French Institute, actually the "curtain raiser" of the three-month festival. Sponsored by the synagogue's Brotherhood and Sisterhood, the concert was devoted to "One Hundred Years of Musical Progress in America." The program included works by Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Charles Ives, Roger Sessions, Aaron Copland, Walter Piston, Virgil Thompson, Roy Harris, and Ernst Bloch. Critics praised the evening as a landmark event in the cultural life of the city. Waterman's parenthetical comment in his report to the trustees is revealing: "It is interesting to note that in the morning immediately after the concert the Guggenheim Foundation called to ask for copies of the program. This indicates the way a general activity, sponsored by our Synagogue, can have far-reaching effects, for very probably this program will play some part in the issuing of the musical fellowships next year."²²

The public forum series included an array of distinguished educators and public figures: besides Kingdon and Kilpatrick, John Dewey, the Columbia University philosopher, ("The Promise of America"), James McDonald, former League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, ("Today's Threat to Freedom"), Mary E. Woolley, President of Mount Holyoke College, ("America: the Flowering of Liberalism"), Mary Beard, the historian and feminist ("Women and the Future of America"). Politically, the speakers were liberal and social democratic in outlook. Beard and Woolley, the two women among the speakers,



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were staunch feminists. Woolley was an important figure in the peace movement. In fact, at a meeting of the trustees, the secretary of the Board, Harry J. Leffert, expressed his "disapproval" over the choice of speakers. They "unnecessarily identified the Synagogue with a trend of political and economic thought to which he was opposed and as to which he did not think the Synagogue should be or appear to be partisan."²³

Responsive as the anniversary program was to the social and political concerns of the day, it placed religion and, in particular, the universalist reform interpretation of Judaism at the core of its affirmation of American democratic doctrine. Two major events of the anniversary celebrations provided contrasting settings for expressing these sentiments, one the sanctuary and the other the ballroom. The first event took place on November 28th, when "a special service was arranged for the Ninetieth Anniversary Sabbath." The second event, the formal banquet held at the Biltmore Hotel on December 6th, highlighted Governor Herbert H. Lehman who delivered the keynote address. The two affairs bear comparison.

The Sabbath service, painstakingly orchestrated by the congregation's ministry, Rabbi Wise, Cantor Isadore Weinstock and Lazar Wiener, the musical director, presented Central Synagogue's legacy as ritual. The introduction to the order of service explained that the musical program represented "a century of ritual composition as developed in America for the reform synagogue." Prayers written by the early rabbis of the synagogue and



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set to music by the synagogue's cantors and other distinguished composers, including Ernst Bloch, echoed Adolph Huebsch's call in 1870 for an "American Jewish synagogue." The greatly abridged prayer service also reflected the high tide of Reform Judaism's universalism. The service was almost entirely in English except for some brief phrases in Hebrew and the concluding mourner's prayer, the *kaddish*, which were transliterated and printed in English Gothic script. No Hebrew type-set was used. The guest preacher personified the other message of the anniversary service: a reaching out to all people. The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Sockman of neighboring Christ Methodist Church spoke on race prejudice and religious intolerance and his hope that "a new sense of spiritual mission among the Jewish people may be generated out of the present German oppression." The choice of Sockman represented Jonah Wise's commitment to interfaith work. Three years earlier Wise, Sockman and the Rev. Dr. Theodore C. Speers, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church, had introduced union Thanksgiving services. Sockman's presence represented another pillar of Wise's spiritual agenda for Central Synagogue.²⁴

Nearly a thousand attended the banquet. On the dais in addition to Lehman, the synagogue's officers, rabbi and cantor, the most notable figure was Felix Warburg, the influential banker, philanthropist and long-time chairman of the JDC. Lehman's hortatory address, "American Judaism—Its Future," was overflowing with the conventional calls for fighting religious apathy and transforming the synagogue into an instrument for social action. "Judaism



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as a religion cannot rest content with constant reiteration of the messages of its prophets and sages. Unless the synagogue can aid a suffering world in its daily problems, giving value to its social ideals, its mission is unfulfilled." Surely, for the public standing of Central Synagogue the governor's presence in itself was the culmination of the anniversary festival. Nevertheless, for the congregation, raising and discussing public issues as a way of celebrating its anniversary, bolstered its self-image as a religious fellowship of civic-minded Americans.²⁵

Unquestionably, Jonah Wise played the key role in giving Central Synagogue nation-wide visibility and influence. His national profile as chairman of JDC fundraising was enhanced by his pioneering work in Jewish religious broadcasting. Significantly, Wise delivered his major anniversary address neither at the special Sabbath service nor at the banquet, but over the Columbia Broadcasting System's coast-to-coast "Church of the Air." Broadcast on the afternoon of the banquet, the entire program was devoted to Central Synagogue's anniversary. Wise spoke on "Our Democracy and Judaism." Two years earlier he began the weekly "Message of Israel" program over a National Broadcasting Company's coast-to-coast network. Scheduled for Saturdays at 6 P.M., the broadcast lasted thirty minutes and originated in the sanctuary of Central Synagogue. It began with the congregation's cantor, Isadore Weinstock and the choir chanting the *Shma Yisrael* followed by a fifteen-minute talk by Wise or a guest rabbi, and concluding with musical selections. (When Fredrick Lechner



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replaced Weinstock as cantor in 1937, he and Wise devoted much time to the musical side of the program.) The broadcasts directed to a general audience, ranged over a wide spectrum of topics that were inherently ecumenical in nature. In the early broadcasts, Wise explained the meaning of Jewish prayer, the *shma* and *kiddush*. Discussing the Jewish Sabbath, he compared the Orthodox observance with “a New England Sunday.” He called the Bible “a handbook of human rights, a text-book of social duties, and a code of humane and enlightened laws.” Most of his guests were prominent Reform rabbis. However, to deflect accusations of partisanship, Wise occasionally invited a Conservative or Orthodox rabbi. During the 90th anniversary celebrations he programmed John Dewey, William Kilpatrick and Mary Woolley for the “Message of Israel.” A self-congratulatory column in a 1949 issue of the congregation’s bulletin, *The Scribe*, declared that the weekly broadcasts had made “Central Synagogue a household word and a symbol of Judaism the length and breadth of this continent.” The program had “also done more to spread knowledge and good will among us and our fellow-Christians than it is possible to estimate.” Hyperbole aside, the “Message of Israel” gave Wise and his congregation national stature and pride.²⁶



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From Centennial Observances to Reconsecration Celebration

The end of the war expressed itself within the congregation in a number of ways. The most poignant was the list of congregation's sons who had fallen, nine in number. The choice of an assistant rabbi was another. Wise invited a young army chaplain, Rabbi Dr. David J. Seligson, who was still in uniform, to serve as his assistant rabbi. For nearly three years Seligson had served with distinction in the India-China-Burma theater. The immediate post-war years placed enormous demands upon Wise. His position as co-chairman of the United Jewish Appeal carried responsibility for raising unprecedented sums to aid the Jewish survivors gathered in the displaced persons camps in Europe. It also forced him into the eye of the political storm that attended the debates over a Jewish state that raged until the establishment of Israel in 1948, and then left an aftermath of rancor and anxiety in some circles. A non-Zionist, Wise shared his misgivings over Jewish nationalism and its challenge to his notion of Judaism, which he saw implicit in political Zionism. In 1946 he wrote in *The Scribe*: "Central Synagogue will restate its belief in Judaism as an American program. It will not yield to the panic of pious plans for committing the Jewish citizens of this democracy to an outdated program of petty nationalism." Wise also confronted congregational realities: "the call of the suburbs," where young Jewish families were busy building attractive new temples, the increasing financial pressures of providing the educational and social services that would attract



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new members, and the outlays required to maintain and refurbish a precious asset—a seventy-five year old building. No wonder then that in announcing plans to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Ahawath Chesed, Wise coupled it with raising the funds to renovate the synagogue.²⁷

In November 1945, a meeting of the congregation voted to proceed with the trustees' recommendation to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the congregation's founding. (The reconstruction work took longer and the costs were higher than expected. On March 27, 1949, "A Thanksgiving Service for the Restoration of Central Synagogue" took place.)²⁸ The format of the festivities was similar to the 1936 celebration, but with significant differences in content. On the "earnest request" of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the umbrella organization of Reform temples, the opening anniversary event was held in conjunction with the Union, which launched its "American Jewish Cavalcade," a countrywide campaign to raise funds for the Reform movement's institutions. Wise explained: "This great religious movement will therefore begin at Central Synagogue and be carried into every city and town in the United States." The joint affair surely promoted the congregation's self-image as an institution with national standing. The planning committee found an additional event to commemorate at the opening ceremony, one that linked Central Synagogue's 100th anniversary with the UAHC cavalcade. The year 1946 marked the centennial of Isaac Mayer Wise's arrival in America. Remembering the founder of the UAHC and



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the Hebrew Union College in the 1870s, who was present at two momentous occasions in the early history of Central Synagogue and father of Jonah Wise, was a fitting addition to Central's anniversary calendar. The theme of the principal address at the opening reflected the three commemorations, " 'Liberal Jewish Cavalcade' — A Tribute to Isaac Mayer Wise." At the last moment, the designated speaker, Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, probably the most popular Reform preacher of his time, became indisposed, and was replaced by James Heller, rabbi of Cincinnati's B'nai Yeshurun. In a sense, Heller closed the circle. For the occasion, the congregation also published the long out-of-print *Reminiscences* of the elder Wise, and copies were sent to members. It is appropriate to recall that on its 90th anniversary, the congregation aided in the publication of Horace Mann's biography and sponsored a conference on his contribution to American education.²⁹

The two months of festivities included a panoply of festivities that involved all of the synagogue groups: the sisterhood sponsored a symposium broadcast from the sanctuary on "Are Americans Losing their Religious Faith;" the synagogue's cantor and choir performed Ernst Bloch's "Sacred Service" which was also broadcast live from the sanctuary; the traditional interfaith Thanksgiving Day service took place at the Synagogue. Other events included an exhibit of images loaned by the Museum of the City of New York on life in the city from 1846 to the turn of the century, and the religious school produced a pageant presented on Jewish life in New York a century ago. At the centennial



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Sabbath services and at the anniversary banquet held at the Waldorf Astoria, Wise called for "a union of all Jewish religious groups in a great synthesis of freedom for all." Central Synagogue, he proclaimed, was "prepared to take the lead to realize the ideals of all Jews of every intellectual and cultural level."³⁰

The endeavors of the congregation's leaders to impart a sense of reverence for the synagogue's history and loyalty to the cherished "old home" is especially evident in the centennial celebration of the cornerstone laying that took place on December 13, 1970. The ceremony was as close a reenactment as possible of the December 14, 1870 event. Efforts were made to exhume the original time capsule and recover its contents with the intention of repositing them in an "updated" capsule. A "cornerstone committee" in fact discussed, collected, and microfilmed the new items to be included. The services included selections from the original dedication ritual, and the speakers filled the roles of Huebsch, Wise and Stein a century before. Donors also enabled the synagogue to mount an important exhibit, "City of Promise: Aspects of Jewish Life in New York, 1654-1970," which was shown from March through August 1971 at the New-York Historical Society. The centennial planners also turned to liturgical innovations as a way of exalting the sanctity of the anniversary. The planning committee commissioned Rabbi Jack Bemporad of the UAHC's Commission on Worship, and the congregation's Lazar Wiener, the music director, to create "A New Sabbath Service" which was presented January 8, 1971.³¹ Thus the planning committee endeavored



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to recreate a collective memory of a great moment in the congregation's history, and also to envelope it in a new ritual service.

Interestingly, in the relatively modest commemoration of the 140th anniversary of Shaar Hashomayim in 1979, the special service consisted of "a sampling of all the liturgies which the congregation had used in its long and proud history." (Once again a commemorative event prompted ritual innovation, blending the ritual and the historical.) Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, who prepared the order of service, included works of Huesch, Kohut and Moses in the Hebrew, German and English originals and translations, as well as selections from the various editions of the *Union Prayer Book* from 1904 to 1975. Dramatically, the services began with the blowing of the *shofar*, the ancient ram's horn sounded in Orthodox synagogues only on the most solemn occasion such as the New Year and the conclusion of Yom Kippur. The "processional" was accompanied by music by Ernst Bloch. The services concluded with musical selections rendered by the choir and a string quartet: a Hassidic *nigun* and three songs based on Israeli motifs. Once more the ritual for an extraordinary occasion echoed the sounds of the new times—from Bloch to the popularizing of a chant of the *Baal Shem Tov* to the Israeli "*Ani chavatzet ha-sharon*" (I am the lily of Sharon).³²

Celebration and fellowship are related and are able to reinforce each other to create a sense of community or congregational loyalty. True, the public events that played so visible a role in Central Synagogue's life were no substitute for the primary function of the



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temple; to provide spiritual sustenance, solace, a moral compass, and education for the young remained its transcendent purpose. Nevertheless, the penchant for commemorating its history played a key role in reminding the congregants of their ties to a place and time that prompted them to recall their temple's larger meaning.

In some measure, the founders of Ahawath Chesed and Shaar Hashomayim brought the sensibility of collective remembrance and celebration from their towns in Europe. They recalled or had once abided by the rule of religious law, the sacredness of Torah, a standard prayer book, and a common holy language. The requirement of a quorum for public worship and the precise regulations governing worship and the annual festive days provided the immigrants on their arrival with a calendar of communal celebrations. These celebrations were governed, of course, by the Hebrew calendar. Reform Judaism truncated the observance of some of these religious rites and ignored others. Nevertheless, the major holydays like *Rosh Hashana*, *Yom Kippur*, and *Succoth* remained tied to an ancient calendar that few but the rabbis could decipher. Surely for the children of the immigrants who were on "American time" celebrating the Exodus from Egypt (Passover) or the giving of the Law at Sinai (*Shavuoth*), determined as they were by the Hebrew dates, carried none of the rhythmic resonance of Independence Day or Washington's Birthday. Consequently, religious anniversaries rooted in Jewish tradition were consigned to the strictly ritual sphere of temple and home. At the same time, the American calendar provided a wealth of national, state and local



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events to celebrate. Opportunities exist in the public arena to identify with a fellowship of citizens and patriots.

However, between the Jewish religious sphere and the American civic realm, American Jews invented their own chronology of anniversaries and festivities. The yearlong celebration in 1953 of the tercentenary of the first Jewish settlement in North America is one auspicious example. It began with the national tercentenary dinner with President Dwight D. Eisenhower as guest of honor and keynote speaker. For the following ten months through tele-dramas over CBS and NBC, historical exhibits, concerts, pageants and convocations, and writing local histories, American Jews informed themselves and their fellow citizens of an American Jewish collective presence since the nation's beginnings. In a similar fashion, Central Synagogue created its own remarkable almanac of communal rites. The calendar was American; the modes of commemoration were American, and the history remembered began in New York. Celebrating the landmarks of Central's past bound together the community of congregants. Surely the sentiment felt for "the old synagogue," as many affectionately referred to "the oldest Jewish house of worship in continuous use in the city," carried weight.³³

The *mitzvah* to commemorate milestones in the synagogue's long life continues to foster a singular sense of fellowship. In a neighborhood and city that are in continuous flux, Central Synagogue has used the historical memory of time and place to offer an example of civic commitment, spiritual coherence and institutional



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stability. When the restored sanctuary was consecrated on September 9, 2001, three years after fire all but destroyed the historic building, the act embodied an extraordinary expression of historical sensibility, the theme elaborated upon in this essay. The costly undertaking to rebuild the one hundred and twenty-nine year old edifice and the determination to restore it as faithfully as possible to its original design, taking into consideration present needs, underscored the congregation's commitment to continuity. So did the consecration ritual. Led by the synagogue's rabbis and officers bearing the torah scrolls, the procession included the descendants of the founding families and students of the current confirmation class. The procession strode from the Community House on East 55th Street to the sanctuary entrance. The mezuzah was fastened to the main door, twelve shofars sounded a flourish, and the torah scrolls were carried in and returned to the Ark. Among the speakers who addressed the more than 2,000 congregants were Governor George Pataki, Mayor Rudolf Guiliani, Cardinal Edward Egan, Reverend Amandus Derr of St. Peter's Church, and the senior Rabbi of Central Synagogue, Peter J. Rubinstein. "We have risen and rebuilt," Rabbi Rubinstein told his congregation and guests. In gratitude for the courage of the City's police and firefighters who saved the sanctuary building from complete destruction, the congregation's president, Samuel Wasserman, presented their benefit societies with a donation.³⁴

In its essentials, the scene harked back to the founding ceremonies of Ahawath Chesed. However, the sights and sounds



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of the tributes documented by the impressive media coverage touched the citizenry of the city and attested to the place the synagogue had achieved in the life of New York.



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Endnotes

- ¹ For brief overview see introduction to *Guide to the Archives Central Synagogue*, New York, 1994, which calls attention to the "vast number" of celebratory events (3).
- ² *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1870, 3; *New York Herald*, Dec. 15, 1870, 5; *World*, Dec. 15, 1870, 8; *Jewish Messenger*, Dec. 23, 5; *Israelite*, Dec. 23, 1870, 8; A meeting of the Board of Trustees and the Building Committee voted to invite the following: the mayor, comptroller, county clerk, superintendent of police, captain of the 19th ward, Judges Cardozo, Joachimson and Koch, presidents, vice-presidents, rabbis and cantors of other congregations. An English-speaking rabbi was to be invited to participate in addition to Huebsch. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, Nov. 22 and Nov. 26, 1870. CS Archives. Andrew S. Dolkart, *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood* (New York: Central Synagogue, 2001), 12-23.
- ³ Bohemia was a province of Austria and part of the Hapsburg Empire. It is now part of the Czech Republic.
- ⁴ *Israelite*, Dec. 23, 1870, 8; Malcolm Stern, "The Story of Central Synagogue," ms in Central Synagogue Archives, hereafter noted as CS Archives. For a discussion of the Moorish style see, Dolkart, *Central Synagogue*, 17-20, and Ivan Davidson Kalmar, "Moorish Style: Orientalism, the Jews, and Synagogue Architecture," *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, (Spring/Summer, 2000), 68-100.
- ⁵ *Tribune*, Dec. 15, 1870, p. 8; *Herald*, Dec. 15, 1870, p. 5.
- ⁶ *Jewish Messenger*, Dec. 23, 1870, p. 2. On Huebsch see, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, 486-487.
- ⁷ *Israelite*, June 10, 1864, 395, June 17, 1864, 404; *Jewish Messenger*, June 10, 1864, 173, 176, June 24, 1864 189. A stormy exchange over Wise's reformist views appears in the above citations. Temple Emanu-El's Rabbi Samuel Adler also spoke.
- ⁸ *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1870, 3; *Jewish Messenger*, Dec. 23, 1870, 2; *Israelite*, Dec. 23, 1870, 8.
- ⁹ James G. Heller, *As Yesterday When It Is Past: A History of the Isaac M. Wise Temple-K.K. B'nai Yeshurun - of Cincinnati in Commemoration of the Centenary of Its Founding*, 107-110.



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- ¹⁰ Ibid Heller; *Israelite*, May 3, 1872 (vol. 18, no. 44), 6. See also, *World*, April 21, 1872, 3; *Jewish Messenger*, May 3, 1872 (vol. 31, no. 17)
- ¹¹ Few scholars have examined the ritual aspect authoritatively. See the following overviews: "Consecration or Dedication," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol IV, 230-231, *ibid*. "Corner-Stone," 275; Judah David Eisenstein, "Khanukat beyt ha-knesset," *Ozar Yisrael*, 299.
- ¹² Among the oldest accounts of such a ritual is the 1792 cornerstone laying of the Beth Elohim synagogue in Charleston, South Carolina. The ritual was conducted by the Freemason lodges of the region (Jews and non-Jews). When the building was dedicated two years later, "Governor Moultrie, the civil and religious officers of the State, the municipal authorities, the reverend clergy and citizens generally attended, and expressed themselves highly delighted and edified . . . over the solemn and imposing ceremony." Charles Reznikoff, *The Jews of Charleston, A History of an American Jewish Community* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1950), 54-56.
- ¹³ For examples of cornerstone laying ceremonies of secular institutions see, *New York Daily Times*, Sept. 19, 1858, 3 (Cooper Institute), *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1861, 3 (the New York [municipal] courthouse). On Shearith Israel see, *Jewish Messenger*, July 15, 1859, 13, *New York Times*, July 12, 1859, 4.
- ¹⁴ Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1947), 472-473.
- ¹⁵ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 101-162, 201-223; Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (University of California Press, 1997), 58-96, 223-244; Brooks McNamara, *Day of Jubilee: The Great Age of Public Celebrations in New York, 1788-1909* (Rutgers U.P.), 112-130; Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Ethnicity as Festive Culture: Nineteenth Century German America on Parade," *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. By Werner Sollors, (Oxford U.P., 1989), 44-76; *New York Times*, April 26, 1865, 1; *Jewish Messenger*, April 28, 1865, 11; Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Atheneum, 1970), 239-243.
- ¹⁶ Dolkart. *Central Synagogue*, 30-33, discusses the move of synagogues to the upper East and West Sides. See for individual synagogues: *New York Times*, April 14, 1895, 2; April 15, 1895, 8; *Jewish Messenger*, Sept. 13, 1873, 4-5; *American Hebrew*, Nov. 20, 1896, 80-81; *American Israelite*, Nov. 19, 1896, 4; *American Hebrew*, Sept. 18, 1895, 125-136; David de Sola Pool, *The Seventieth Street Synagogue of the Congregation Shearith Israel* (New York, 1947), 7-12; *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1896, 6.



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- ¹⁷ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1994), 105-127; Ronald H. Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 57-108.
- ¹⁸ Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974), 107-137, 235; Sam Cauman, *Jonah Bondi Wise, A Biography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1966), 149-170.
- ¹⁹ Scrapbook, Central Synagogue 90th Anniversary Celebration. Plans (n.d.); CS Archives; Jonah B. Wise in *Central Synagogue*, vol.13, no. 6, Feb. 7, 1936; Minutes of the Board of Trustees, March 18, 1936; Report of Nominating Committee, April 24, 1936, CS Archives.
- ²⁰ Edmund Waterman, Report of the Ninetieth Anniversary Committee to the Board of Trustees, October 14, 1936, CS Archives. In an earlier memo to the trustees, Waterman wrote: "Special emphasis is to be laid on the fact that the Jew, a member of a religion of the faith of Israel, is a part of the American majority which has been and is deeply concerned with justice and liberty. It is proposed to use the following program for disseminating the ideas which we all feel have seriously been challenged in America and lacking which, the position of all persons dependent on liberal thought and human freedom will be intolerable." June 16, 1936, *ibid.* CS Archives.
- ²¹ Edmund Waterman, A Memoir of the Special Committee for the 90th Anniversary, June 16, 1936; *idem*, Report of the Ninetieth Anniversary Committee to the Board of Trustees, October 14, 1936, CSA. *New York Times*, December 13, 1936, xx; *Central Synagogue Ninetieth Anniversary Program (Bulletin of Central Synagogue)*, CS Archives.
- ²² Edmund Waterman, Report of the Ninetieth Anniversary Committee, CS Archives.
- ²³ Minutes, Board of Trustees, October 14, 1936, CSA; Mary R. Beard, "Women and the Future of America," CS Archives. *New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1936, 14; Leffert, was active in Republican Party politics (*New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1952, 27).
- ²⁴ *A Prayer of Thanks for Ninety Years* (Central Synagogue, 1936); *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1936, II, 3; Cauman, *Jonah Bondi Wise*, 121, 200-201.



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- ²⁵ Members were urged to make "early reservations" for the banquet. "The young people of the congregation are especially invited to attend, not only the banquet, but the dance, which is to be held after dinner. ("Central Synagogue Ninetieth Anniversary Program" n.d. CS Archives; *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1936, 3.
- ²⁶ *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 7, 1936, 8. On "Message of Israel," see: Cauman, *Jonah Bondi Wise*, 136-148, Zev Zahary, "A History and Survey of Jewish Religious Broadcasting" (Ph.D. dissertation, 1959), 36-81, 216-223; *The Scribe*, Oct. 12, 1949, vol 11, no. 2, 4. In 1950, the broadcast was moved to Sunday at 10 A.M. Zahary remarks: "ABC engineers set up their equipment next to the pulpit platform. Signs outside invited the public to attend the special radio services....Few came. The scene was of the rabbi talking to empty benches yet at the same time being heard by one of the largest congregations in the world." Idem. 222. For the genesis of the "Eternal Light" radio and later television program sponsored by the Jewish Theological Seminary, see Jeffrey Shandler and Elihu Katz, "Broadcasting American Judaism: The Radio and Television Department of the Jewish Theological Seminary," *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, ed. by Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997), II, 365-378.
- ²⁷ *The Scribe*, Jan. 11, 1946, vol. 7, no. 4, 1; Nov. 12, 1949, vol. 11, No. 3, 1; CS Archives; Cauman, *Jonah Bondi Wise*, 171-194.
- ²⁸ Jonah B. Wise [form letter to congregation members], Nov. 7, 1945; Jonah B. Wise to Dear Friend [form letter to congregation members], Jan. 24, 1946 CSA; *The Scribe*, vol. 10, No. 8, March 10, 1949. In *The Scribe* of Nov. 7, 1946 (vol. 8, no. 3, 1), Wise wrote: "We now have the financial means which will enable us to begin our sacred task of restoration of our beautiful house of worship and of the modernization of its vestry. The length to which we shall be able to go in this beloved enterprise will depend on the thoughtfulness of the rest of our membership in making their contributions." CS Archives
- ²⁹ *The Scribe*, vol. 8, no. 4, Dec. 9, 1946, 1; *Centennial Program, 1846-1946, Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of Central Synagogue*; CS Archives. An entire issue of *The Scribe* was devoted to *Reminiscences* which was first published in 1901 (No. 6, May 12, 1946); Herbert Schwarz, *Your Temple: A Unique Story of Devotion, Faith and Service* (New York: Central Synagogue Brotherhood, 1958), 20.
- ³⁰ *New York Times*, Dec. 22, 1946, 10.



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³¹ *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1970, B-1; *A City of Promise: Aspects of Jewish Life in New York, 1654-1970*; *New-York Historical Society Presents City of Promise: Aspects of Jewish Life in New York 1654-1970*, Sponsored by the Central Synagogue to Commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Laying of its Cornerstone.

³² *Service for 140th Anniversary*, November 2, 1979, CS Archives.

³³ Goren, *Politics and Public Culture of American Jews*, 195-202

³⁴ *New York Times*, September 10, 2001, B-1. For media coverage see web site: www.centralsynagogue.org/feature.consecration.01.php.

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The first book in this series is *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood*, by Andrew S. Dolkart, published 2002 by Central Synagogue. This publication won a Regional Historical Services Award for Excellence from the Lower Hudson Conference in 2002.



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Cover: Ceremonies consecrating and reopening Central Synagogue, September 9, 2001.

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