

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

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CHAPTER SIX

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY-(K'HILLAH)

A. THE SYNAGOGUE

This institution is well known in the New Testament. It originated during the vacant period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. While the Temple existed this was only a supplement to the service in the Temple. There in the synagogue the people could meet for prayer, study of the Law and probably also for discussion about communal and national affairs. *

*** There were 460 synagogues in Jerusalem in the time of Christ (according to the Talmud). Jesus frequented the synagogues of His hometown, Nazareth, also in Capernaum and others as is recorded in Matthew 12:9; Luke 4:16; John 6:59; 18:20. Paul preached the Gospel in the synagogues as seen in Acts 13:5; 14:1; 18:4.**

After the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial service the synagogue became the center of worship and of Jewish life as a whole. It was from the synagogue in Diaspora that Paul disseminated the Gospel to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

Now, like the Jewish religious life in general so also the synagogue is on a sharp decline, but until quite recently (before the two world wars) the synagogue in the old Jewish communities was the center and circumference of Jewish life. It was the treasury of Jewish ideals, doctrines and history. There the Jews, almost all the males, met day by day for the three daily services. There Jews, individually or in groups, spent most of the day and a great portion of the night in study of the sacred books — and most synagogues usually had large libraries of sacred books placed on shelves free for all.

That is why the synagogue is also called in Yiddish shod (school), because it was there that the Jew got his “Judaism,” and, as already mentioned, Judaism to him meant life — as it controlled almost all his thoughts and actions.

The Greek word synagogue is a translation of the Hebrew word beth-knesseth which means the House of Assembly (or congregation). Any Jew could come in at any time of day or night (not during service) for a rest, a chat or even a nap. It was his club, a second home.

The Christian missionary is advised to attend some Jewish services at the synagogue and get acquainted with the order of service and also with the things inside the edifice. The most sacred part in the synagogue is the “Ark,” reminiscent of the “Ark of the Covenant,” usually called “Aran Hakodesh” (the Holy Ark) wherein the “Sepher Torah” is kept.

This Torah is a parchment scroll on which the “Five Books of Moses” are written by hand in the original Hebrew text. The Ark is placed in a recess in the east wall. Its doors are covered by a curtain called parachet. In front of it is usually suspended a ner tamid — a perpetual lamp, always lighted.

In about the center of the synagogue stands the Bema, (which may be translated as “pulpit”), upon which the Sepher Torah is laid when it is read. In many synagogues the Bema serves also as a platform at which the Chazan (cantor) stands when leading in prayer. There also stands the Rabbi when he delivers a sermon. Some synagogues have a special “stand,” at which the man leading in prayer stands.

Some striking features about the synagogues are:

- The absence of pictorial emblems (no portraits or statues).
- No instrumental music is allowed (Reform Temples are exceptions in this regard), and conspicuous by their absence are the women.
- No women are allowed inside the prayer hall. Those women who want to pray (although women are not enjoined to recite prayers) with the congregation, may do so in an adjoining room.

Some synagogues have balconies for the women. In Reform Temples there is mixed seating. You may know that one of the benedictions in the morning service is: “Blessed art thou . . . who has not made me a woman.”

B. THE FUNCTIONARIES OF THE SYNAGOGUE

The Functionaries of the Synagogue or of the community, as a whole, are usually composed of:

1. The “RABBI.” Formerly his most important duties were to care for the religious needs of his congregation, especially see to it that the community is provided with kosher food (see Vocabulary).

Under his jurisdiction came also the laws and rites of marriage and divorce. (These kosher and marital laws are also the main tasks of the Israeli Rabbinate). Today, and particularly in Western countries (U.S.A., England, France, etc.), the rabbis, especially the Reform rabbis (imitation of the Christian pastor), have assumed many of the modern pastor’s activities: as preaching sermons, sometimes also leading in prayer, and certain social activities. He is expected to be a good “mixer” and he is so usually, “a jolly good fellow.”

2. The “SHOCHET” (“slaughterer”), who in a prescribed manner slaughters kosher (ritually fit) animals, mainly chicken and cattle, and thus is supplying kosher meat for the Jewish consumer.

3. The “CHAZAN” (cantor), who leads in the service; sometimes he also serves as the “baal korei” (Reader from the scroll of the Torah) although these two offices may be, and it often has been, performed by anyone of the congregants who volunteers for them.

4. The “MOHEL” — the circumciser.

5. The “SOFEIR,” a scribe who writes the “Torah,” (here meaning “the five books of Moses,” which for synagogal use are to be written by hand on parchment). He also writes on parchment the passages from the Pentateuch that are enclosed in the tefillin, (phylacteries) and in the mezuzah (small scroll nailed to the door post). Smaller communities which cannot support a sofeir of their own import their religious articles from other communities.

6. The “GABBAI,” or Treasurer, one of whose tasks is to allot the various duties or “treats” connected with the service.

7. The “SHAMASH,” who serves as beadle, sexton and usher as the occasion may require. Up to a generation or two ago, the Shamash had the task of calling the Jews to the synagogue to pray. Thus, before dawn he used to go around the Jewish sections of the towns with a hammer knocking on the doors or shutters, crying aloud: “Get up, get up to the service of the Creator.”

On Fridays, in the late afternoon, he used to go about crying: “To synagogue!” (“In shul arein!”). This was an indication to all those laggards who were not yet ready for the Sabbath, to hurry up, wash and dress fittingly and rush to the Synagogue. The Shamash also served as the Rabbi’s messenger in his function as Rabbi.

C. MIKVEH

Every community has had a Mikveh — a bath for ritual ablution and immersion for purification, mainly for women after the period of their menstruation (only after she had performed this cleansing ritual was she considered as “clean”). The males used it for cleansing their bodies on the eve of Sabbath, and on holy days. Some pious Jews purified themselves in the Mikveh every morning in preparation for Prayer.

D. OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Since the synagogue had been the center of Jewish life, there clustered about it various associations for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the individual Jew as well as for the community as a whole.

There was the *chevrah kadisha* (the sacred Association) whose task had been to care for the ritual of the dead, and the upkeep of the cemetery.

There were societies for the care of the sick, the aged, the orphaned, helping poor brides to get married, to provide the poor with “Matzeth” (unleavened bread) and wine for the Passover, to provide lodging for strangers, to buy books (sacred) for the library and many others.

There were various groups for study; groups to study the Talmudic books with all their hair-splitting casuistry and intricacies. Less learned folk (and with less time at their disposal) joined themselves into Mishnah groups. The Mishnah was written in Hebrew, and is not so difficult and intricate as is the Gemarah which is mostly in Aramaic. And there was the Ain Yaakov group. This book contains, in simple Hebrew, the homiletical portions of the Talmudic books and their various legends. The less learned people, usually the busy working men, satisfied themselves with the reading of the Psalms in spare time.

As a whole the synagogue and its services have been the expression of the common hopes and yearnings, of the ideals, exultations, joys and sorrows of the Jewish people. To be expelled from the synagogue was considered a most terrible punishment (see John 9:22; 12:42).

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize again that the synagogue, as all Judaism, is rapidly losing its grip on the Jewish people. It is becoming less and less a force in Jewry.

In America where the largest number of the Jewish people is settled, imposing synagogues are erected, but they are no longer “houses of prayer” and inspiration. Their purpose seems to be more negative than positive. It is more to keep the Jews away from the influence of the Christians, than to teach them Judaism. For fear that the Jewish youth might stray away into Gentile society, everything is being done to attract them to a place where they could keep to themselves. Thus the synagogue is rapidly becoming a social center with sports, dances, and various other entertainments. No inducement is spared to keep the adolescent within the fold and dissuade him from intermarriage and assimilation.

The Reform Jews call their religious center a “Temple” —a word which to the modern liberal ear sounds better than the word “synagogue,” because, although the word is of non-Jewish origin, the institution itself is uniquely (and peculiarly) Jewish. The Liberal Reform Jews prefer not to be stamped and identified as Jews (they prefer some degree of painless assimilation).

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