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Spirituality and the Art of the Ancient Synagogue¹

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In 1952, Cornell University opened an “interfaith chapel” on its Ithaca, New York campus. The chapel was established in Cornell’s Anabel Taylor Hall after “long and protracted” discussions regarding the furnishing and decoration of the chapel among the various religious groups that were to conduct religious services there. Among the most interesting features of the chapel as it was constructed was a “3-sided revolving altar.” One side of the “altar” (a term, like “chapel,” drawn from the vocabulary of Christian sacred architecture) bore a cross, a second side was left undecorated, and the third side bore

¹ This paper is dedicated to my first “rebbe,” Mr. Yearl E. Schwartz of San Diego, with thanks. Many thanks to participants in the Orthodox Forum for comments that enriched this paper. I particularly thank Rabbi Norman Lamm, Professor Daniel Lasker, and Professor Vivian Mann. The discussion of ancient synagogues in this article is based upon material that I discussed more extensively in my *Art and Judaism During the Greco Roman Period: A New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

more intricate Jewish iconography.² The Cornell chapel was part of a growing trend in post-war America, giving expression in stone, glass and wood to the newly-developing American religious triumvirate of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism.³ Among those consulted in the course of the “long and protracted” discussions was Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

In his highly critical response, dated December 6, 1950, Rabbi Soloveitchik stressed his concern that if the chapel were to come about, then students might “later be inclined to introduce a church-synagogue center into their own communities.”⁴ Interfaith chapels did indeed develop in American communities during the post-war years, albeit rarely.⁵ In his response, Rabbi Soloveitchik did not discuss in a detailed manner the nature of Christianity. There is no discussion of idolatry, syncretism (*shituf*), or any of the classical categories of the Jewish-Christian relationship.⁶ There is not even any mention of *kedushat beit ha-kneset*, synagogue holiness! Rabbi Soloveitchik dispenses with this discussion by stating that “Halachic

² E-mails from Robert Johnson, 28 June 2000 and Morris Goldfarb on 4 July 2000.

³ The classic statement of this ideology is W. Herberg’s *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay In American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960).

⁴ Letter on the Cornell interfaith chapel, p. 3. Many thanks to Rabbi Dov Berkowitz for making this responsum available to me in the course of his seminar on Art and Judaism at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, in 1981. I also thank the anonymous recipient of this private communication from Rabbi Soloveitchik and Rabbi Morris Goldfarb, formerly of Cornell University, for his help in contacting the recipient and for providing vital information about the chapel.

⁵ A fine example of the interfaith chapel approach, and of the ideology that spawned it, is the planned community of Columbia, Maryland (with ground breaking in 1966). According to the community web site, Columbia has “4 Interfaith Centers, where denominations share common worship facilities (plus a fifth center planned in River Hill).” See: www.columbia-md.com/columbiaindex.html. Rabbi Soloveitchik ascribes the possible development of local inter-faith chapels to the “almost neurotic fear of anti-Semitism” among American Jews. While this was certainly an important factor, the issues relating to the development of such chapels were considerably more complex than he allows for here.

⁶ On these categories, see: Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness And Tolerance: Studies In Jewish-Gentile Relations In Medieval And Modern Times* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

formalism and syllogism will not suffice to solve it [the question at hand]. Central historical realities with their deep seated philosophical meaning must be taken into account.”⁷ These categories, which clearly would place Christianity in a negative light, were best unstated in post-war America. In a telling statement, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that “I am firmly convinced that it is our privilege and duty, as Jews and Americans, to oppose the Christianization of the synagogue either in its architectural form or in the mode of worship as it would be the privilege and duty of a good Christian to object to the Judaization of the Church.”⁸ Rabbi Soloveitchik dealt in depth with Jewish aesthetics of synagogue construction and decoration, and to differentiate the categories that he develops from Christian art and architecture. His analysis encompasses biblical sources, the writings of Philo and Josephus, and rabbinic literature medieval and early modern halakhists.

In his analysis, Rabbi Soloveitchik distinguishes between rabbinic and medieval attitudes toward synagogue art.⁹

In regard to the synagogue, we do not find in the Halachic literature (with the exception of a single passage of the Mekhilta quoted by Rashi, Exodus 20:20) a specific prohibition against paintings or any other design representing the human figure. On the contrary, our sages were more tolerant toward the display of human images in the synagogue than at home.

⁷ Letter on the Cornell interfaith chapel, p. 1.

⁸ Letter on the Cornell interfaith chapel, p. 4. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s approach to Christianity in this responsum was later stated in a prescriptive manner in his “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 16:2 (1964): 21–9: “It is self-evident that the confrontation of two faith communities is possible only if it is accomplished by clear assurance that both parties will enjoy equal rights and full religious freedom. We shall resent any attempt on the part of the community of the many to engage us in a peculiar encounter in which our confronter will command us to take a position beneath him while placing himself not alongside of but above us” (p. 21). In 1964 Rabbi Soloveitchik was concerned that in Jewish-Christian “debate” concerning “matters of faith,” “one of the confronters will be impelled to avail himself of the language of the opponent” (p. 24). In our case he is similarly concerned with loss of Jewish individuality in the physical prayer environment.

⁹ Letter on the Cornell interfaith chapel, p. 2.

In the tractates Rosh Hashana (24) and Avoda Zara (43) we find that the statue of the king was displayed in a Babylonian synagogue and nevertheless, Rav, Samuel, and Levi did not refrain from worshipping there, though they would have objected to the exhibition of the effigy in a private home. The reason for the distinction between synagogue and home is that while in the synagogue no one would suspect the community of having the statue for a religious purpose, such suspicion would be warranted concerning a private home. In the course of time, however, tradition has reversed its attitude. While pictures were not banned from Jewish homes as I have mentioned, the synagogue had excluded any image of man from its decorative motives. Moreover, many Halachic scholars insisted upon utmost simplicity of the synagogue, and disapproved of elaborate ornaments in general. Maimonides, for instance, objected to murals and mosaics which would confront the worshipper during his devotional meditation because they might serve as a distraction. An even stronger dislike was shown towards figured subjects such as animals. Rabbi Eliakim of Cologne ordered his congregation to remove from the synagogue a carpet which had animal designs woven on it. Likewise, we know of a controversy concerning the display of the lion of Judah above the ark that raged in the sixteenth century and in which Rabbi Moses Di'Tirani, Rabbi Mayer of Padua, and Rabbi Joseph Karo were involved. There were many synagogues that did not tolerate panels representing animals. Yet again the practice was more liberal and all figures with the exception of the human form were introduced as architectural designs for the synagogue. As to the anthropomorphic symbols, there is almost unanimity of disapproval (the fact that some excavations disclose such motives is irrelevant to us. The tradition as such has rejected them).

The art that is the subject of this inquiry began to appear during the latter part of the fourth century, and continued through the

eighth century. It roughly dates after the Palestinian *Amoraim* and before the onset of the Medieval period. This period in late antiquity witnessed first the Christianization and then the Islamicization of Jewish Palestine. Both the leniencies suggested by Rabbi Soloveitchik and the later stringencies that he observes may be seen in the archaeological record, though a chronological distinction does not exhaust the complexity of the situation on the ground. From the latter fourth through the sixth centuries, communities throughout the land of Israel widely embraced the visual arts of their day, while other nearby synagogue communities rejected them. During the seventh and eighth centuries numerous communities came to discard the visual arts of their ancestors, some even altering synagogue art that their ancestors had found to be acceptable.¹⁰ In a sense, the move toward aniconicism was anticipated by Rabbi Soloveitchik's comment that "the fact that some excavations disclose such motives is irrelevant to us. The tradition as such has rejected them."¹¹

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus upon a group of synagogues that once bore carpet mosaics. In particular, the fourth century synagogue of Hammath Tiberias B, the fifth century synagogue of Sepphoris, and the sixth century synagogues of Na'aran and Beth Alpha. These mosaics form a definite group, bearing very similar iconography. In fact, this regional type is unique in ancient Jewish artistic production. In cities of the Diaspora no specific Jewish iconography may be found in floor mosaics, synagogue mosaics being representative of local techniques and having no relationship with one another. In the land of Israel, on the other hand, such a regional type existed over a three hundred year period. For Jews, of course, simple continuity is a form of spirituality, and this fact should not be overlooked. What unifies these floors is that each bears the image of a zodiac wheel in the center, and a Torah shrine on the

¹⁰ In a series of studies I have dealt with the "spirituality" of the synagogue, focusing upon the sanctity of the synagogue. See in particular my *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue During the Greco-Roman Period* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

¹¹ Letter on the Cornell interfaith chapel, p. 2.

floor immediately before the podium (in Na'aran and Beth Alpha, the apse) where an actual Torah shrine stood.¹²

The use of mosaics within synagogues was typical of public places during the Byzantine period. This was not a distinctly “Jewish” art form by any means. In fact, there is little in the actual iconography, or, for that matter, in the architecture and furnishings of the buildings, that is uniquely “Jewish.” These are buildings of their time and place. They do not reflect a Jewish national art, or a unique architectural legacy. As in later periods, the architecture of the synagogue was part and parcel of the world in which Jews lived – in this case the Greco-Roman world. Yet it is not difficult to apprehend the “spirituality” of the synagogues under discussion, and by extension the “spirituality” implicit in the art of other synagogues in Palestine during late antiquity. Though virtually every element has parallels, and often roots, in the Christian art of late antiquity, once these elements entered the synagogue, to quote Byzantinist Thomas Mathews, “Together with the ritual that they (the buildings) contained, they constitute a single symbolic matrix.”¹³ In our case a single Jewish “symbolic matrix.”

The focal point of the synagogue, and hence of the spirituality of the synagogue, was the Torah. When one entered one of our synagogues, it was natural to look across a long nave to a Torah shrine. The shrine was undoubtedly flanked by seven branched *menorot*.¹⁴

¹² The most recent discussion of these materials is to be found in L.I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

¹³ T.F. Mathews, *Byzantium From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Abrams, 1998), p. 97. For fuller discussions, see my “Art and the Liturgical Context of the Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic,” in *Galilee: Confluence of Cultures: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Galilee*, ed. E.M. Meyers (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 227–37; *idem*, my “On the Liturgical Interpretation of Ancient Synagogues in the Land of Israel,” in *Jewish Cultural Life of Late Antiquity in its Byzantine-Christian Context*, ed. L.I. Levine, (forthcoming) (Hebrew) and *Art and Judaism during the Greco-Roman Period*.

¹⁴ The presence of seven-branched *menorot* is an issue of some halakhic interest, owing to a tradition that appears in the BT *Rosh ha-Shanah* 24a–b (= *Avodah Zarah* 43a, *Menaḥot* 28b. See *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Exodus 20:20):

This is the image that emerges from the Torah shrine panels in our mosaics. A large shrine, crowned with an aedicula, in some cases with a lamp suspended from its apex, stood at the focal point of the synagogue. In fact, all of the elements of such a Torah compound have been discovered.¹⁵ An aedicula topped with rampart lions, with a suspension hole at its apex for a lamp, was uncovered in the synagogue of Nabratein in the Upper Galilee. This shrine is especially similar to the shrine illustrated at Beth Alpha. Cloths like those that hang before the shrine, called a *vilon* or *parokhta* (reminiscent of the biblical *parokhet*),¹⁶ are well known from extant Coptic textiles and images in non-Jewish contexts.¹⁷ *Menorot* like the flanking *menorot* illustrated were discovered at Hammath Tiberias A, and more recently at Maon in the Mt. Hebron region. Even sculptured lions like those illustrated flanking the Beth Alpha ark were found at Chorazin and Baram. In short, what is illustrated is, to a large extent, what actually stood in the synagogue. Seven-branched *menorot* blazed on either side of a cabinet that by the third century was already being associated with the Ark of the Covenant, and was called an *arona*.¹⁸ These lamps not only reflected a connection between the *mikdash me'at* ("small temple" or "lesser holiness") and the Temple. They served to focus the eye of the visitor on the Torah shrine. The lamp suspended from the Torah shrine would have provided an additional spotlight for the true focal point of the synagogue, the Torah. All of these lights together served an important practical function: they provided the light necessary for the reading of Scripture in other-

Our Rabbis taught: No one may make a building (*bayit*) in the form of the shrine (*hekhhal*), an exedra in place of the entrance hall (*ulam*), a courtyard (*hazer*) in place of the court (*azarah*), a table in place of the table (of the bread of the Presence), a *menorah* in place of the *menorah*, but one may make (a *menorah*) with five, six or eight (branches). Even of other metals (you shall not make a *menorah*).

See my discussion of this issue in *This Holy Place*, pp. 46–49.

¹⁵ See my "Art and the Liturgical Context" for a full discussion.

¹⁶ E.g. JT *Meg.* 3:1, 73d; JT *Yoma* 7:1, 44b; JT *Meg.* 4:5, 75b; JT *Sot.* 8:6, 22a.

¹⁷ See examples presented by A. Stauffer, ed., *Textiles of Late Antiquity* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), esp. pp. 8, 10, 14, 24, and 43.

¹⁸ *This Holy Place*, p. 80.

wise dark (and in the winter, cold) halls. When later traditions bless those who provide *ner le-ma'or*,¹⁹ they reflected a true need of the synagogue and a real opportunity for participation in synagogue life that is difficult to appreciate for us who live in a world changed forever by Mr. Edison. The brilliance of light at the focal point of the synagogue must have been quite striking, bringing to my mind (though apparently not to the mind of any preserved ancient interpreter) the adage in *Proverbs* (6:23): *Ki ner miṣvah, ve-torah or*, “For the commandment is a lamp and Torah is light.”

Scholars have long asked why, if the furnishings illustrated actually existed, it was necessary to illustrate them on the floor. The answer is a simple one. The ark panels of our mosaics are reflections of the Torah shrine and *menorot* of the synagogue. Christians used the same technique within churches, paralleling the ritual furnishings of the church in its wall and floor decorations. They serve the same function that a reflecting pool does (and did) before a major public building: these reflections add dignity to the Shrine, and to the Torah within it. The mosaicist at Naʿaran went a step further. Below the image of the Torah shrine the artist set the image of Daniel in the Lion’s Den. Daniel’s hands are raised in a gesture known as an *orans* position in Christian art, and as *nesiat kappayim*, the “raising of hands,” in biblical and rabbinic sources. Elsewhere in this mosaic we find additional figures, male and female, assuming this position. This image of Daniel is not unique. It appears on a basalt member that was most likely a Torah shrine base from the Golan, and once appeared in the synagogue mosaic at Susiya in Mt. Hebron. In fact, the *orans* position seems to have been a common Jewish prayer stance during the Byzantine period.²⁰ It is my suggestion that

¹⁹ “Lamp for illumination.” *Seder Avodat Yisrael*, ed. Z. Baer (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1937), p. 230; A. Yaari, “The *mi-Shebeirakh* Prayers: History and Texts,” *Kirjath Sepher* 33, nos. 1–2 (1957–1958): 118–30, 233–51 (Hebrew).

²⁰ G. Alon, *Studies in Jewish History* (Israel: ha-Kibbutz Hame’uchad, 1967), pp. 181–4, Hebrew; Y. Deviri, *Light in the Sayings and Aphorisms of the Sages*, (Holon: the author, 1976), pp. 112–15 (Hebrew); E. Zimmer, *Society and its Customs: Studies in the History and Metamorphosis of Jewish Customs* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1996), pp. 78–88 (Hebrew); D. Sperber, *The Customs of Israel* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1994), vol. 3, pp. 88–91 (Hebrew).

“Daniel” was placed before the ark so as to reflect another important feature of synagogue furnishing: the *sheliaḥ zibbur* (prayer leader) who stood before the ark, in the technical language of the period, *over lifne ha-tevah*.²¹ In a sense, the flesh and blood *sheliaḥ zibbur* fills the ritual space between the three dimensional ark, and the two dimensional representation of the same ark. The actual image of Daniel, drawn from Christian art, was placed in a position in our mosaic that reflects an essential element of Jewish spirituality. Like the *sheliaḥ zibbur*, Daniel directs his prayers toward the ark, and through it, towards the Holy City of Jerusalem. Daniel here is illustrated fulfilling Daniel 6:10, where Daniel “went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem....”²² Closing the loop, this text was taken by the Sages to be the biblical warrant for our own alignment toward Jerusalem in prayer.²³ The use of biblical characters to presage and reflect contemporary practice is well known in rabbinic sources, as well as in Christian sources.²⁴

Another important feature of many of our synagogues was the

²¹ “Pass before the [Torah] chest.” See the relevant bibliography cited by Z. Weiss, “The Location of the Sheliaḥ Zibbur during Prayer,” *Cathedra* 55 (1990): 9–21 (Hebrew). To this, add: J. Hoffman, “The Ancient Torah Service in Light of the Realia of the Talmudic Era,” *Conservative Judaism* 42:2 (1989–90): 42–44; Yaakov Elman, “Babylonian Baraitot in the Tosefta and the ‘Dialectology’ of Middle Hebrew,” *AJS Review* 16 (1991): 23; D. Rosenthal, “Palestinian Traditions and their Transmission to Babylonia,” *Cathedra* 92 (1999): 25–27, and especially note 140 (Hebrew).

²² Revised Standard Version.

²³ Tosefta *Berakhot* 3:6.

²⁴ The art of late antique churches often reflects this type of projection. So, for example, in the wall mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna we find that:

All four scenes allude to the eucharist sacrifice. To make this significance plain, an altar is depicted between Abel and Melchizedek, on which are placed a chalice and two loaves of bread, identical in shape with that which Melchizedek offers and also with the eucharistic bread which the church used during the sixth century. The altar motif appears again in the opposite mosaic: Isaac is shown kneeling upon the altar, and even the table behind which the three angels are seated resembles the simple wooden altar of Christian antiquity. The three round cakes which Sarah has placed before the heavenly messengers are marked with the sign of the cross and recall again the eucharistic hosts of that time (O.G. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art*

presence of biblical scenes. At Na'aran and Susiya, Daniel appears. At Gaza, David the harpist; at Gerasa, Noah's ark; at Meroth a lamb lying with a lion; and at Beth Alpha *akeidat Yizhak*, the "Binding of Isaac." At Sepphoris we have an absolute medley of images, ranging from the annunciation to Abraham that Sarah would give birth, to *akeidat Yizhak* and finally Aaron before the Tabernacle, the table for showbread, first fruits, and assorted sacrifices. Again, all of these images are, in one way or another, associated with Christian art, and have distinct parallels in Christian art. Unique to the Binding of Isaac scene at Sepphoris is the image of Abraham's and Isaac's shoes left at the base of Mt. Moriah. This theme is known from later Christian illustrations.²⁵ This detail is unknown, however, in Jewish art or literature. Nowhere do we hear in midrashic literature of God ordering Abraham to "remove your shoes, for the place where you are standing is holy." Whether the source of this detail was Christian, or whether, by one of those circuitous paths of relationship by which Jewish sources made their way to Christian audiences, its origin was Jewish, this detail reflects a notion that the Sages and others attending synagogue in antiquity would have well understood. A hint of the need for clean feet within synagogue contexts may be found in *Genesis Rabbah* 42. In this text clean feet are clearly described as a virtue for one who was entering the synagogue. According to this tradition, when Abraham and his men chased after the kings to rescue Lot in far-away Dan, miraculously, "their feet did not become dusty (*lo nitabku ragleihen*). Rather, they were like he who walks from his home to the synagogue."²⁶ The necessity of removing shoes before going up to the Temple Mount appears in *Mishnah*

and Statecraft in Ravenna (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 25; Mathews, *Byzantium*, p. 103).

The art of the church, so influential in so many ways upon the art of the synagogue, provides a reasonable parallel for interpreting Daniel at Naaran. Daniel in our synagogue, like Melchizedek at San Vitale, is a legitimization and projection of contemporary practice into the eternal present.

²⁵ Z. Weiss and E. Netzer, *Promise and Redemption: A Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1996), pp. 30–1.

²⁶ *Genesis Rabbah* 42, ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), p. 419, and the parallels cited there.

Berakhot, chapter nine, and the requirement of removing shoes (and washing feet) before entering synagogues is well documented.²⁷ In a Genizah document, titled *Hilkhot Erez Israel* by its editor, this is stated explicitly:²⁸

And so the Sages said: One shall not enter the Temple Mount with his staff and shoes” (M. *Berakhot* 9:5).

Though by our sins the Temple Mount is not ours, we do have the *mikdash me'at*, and we are obligated to behave [towards it] in sanctity and awe. For it is written: “My Temple, fear” (*Lev.* 19:30, 26:2).

Therefore the ancients decreed in all synagogue courtyards that fountains of living water for the sanctification of the hands and feet [be set up].

If there was a delicate or sick person, unable to remove [his shoes], and he was careful as he walked [not to dirty them], he is not forced to remove [his shoes]....

This passage suggests that piety towards the synagogue, and particularly ritual ablution of the feet and entry to the synagogue barefooted, was taken over from the Temple to the *mikdash me'at*. The notion that ritual purity was necessary for entrance into synagogues first appears in post-Amoraic literature.²⁹ An interesting parallel to our text is the liturgy of Anan son of David (c. eighth century), who, on the model of the Temple, decreed that worshippers wash their hands and feet before entering synagogues associated with what became known as Karaism.³⁰ A washing installation (*gorna*) in

²⁷ This Holy Place, pp. 82–3.

²⁸ *Hilkhot Erez-Israel min ha-Geniza*, ed. M. Margoliot, ed. I. Ta-Shma (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1973), pp. 131–2.

²⁹ Cf. Z. Safrai, “From Synagogue to Little Temple,” in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress in Jewish Studies*, Division B, (Jerusalem: World Union for Jewish Studies, 1990), pp. 150–51. See Levine, “From Community Center to Small Temple: The Furnishings and Interior Design of Ancient Synagogues,” *Cathedra* 60 (1991): 40–41.

³⁰ J. Mann, “Anan’s Liturgy and His Half-Yearly Cycle for Reading the Law,” *Journal of Jewish Lore and Philosophy* 1:1–4 (1919): 344, n. 26 (Hebrew). Al-Qumisi informs

the synagogue compound (forecourt?) is evidenced as early as the *Yerushalmi*.³¹ Evidence of ritual ablution is found in synagogue ruins from the Byzantine period. A particularly well-preserved washing installation was discovered in the narthex of the last stage of the Ein Gedi synagogue.³² By placing the images of shoes near the entrance to the synagogue, the artist, inadvertently or not, suggests that just as Abraham and Isaac removed their shoes prior to ascending the Temple Mount, so too are shoes to be removed before entering the synagogue. Cues of this sort are known from non-Jewish mosaics, my favorite being a mosaic from Pompeii that shows a dog on a leash, with the inscription “beware of the dog.”³³

The images of the Temple service at Sepphoris are particularly exciting, since they are the only such images extant from ancient synagogues. While a few lists of the priestly courses, the *mishmarot*, have been uncovered, here we find images that truly reflect Jewish conceptions.³⁴ To choose a single detail: on the basket of *bikkurim*, birds appear on either side of the basket. This is not an unusual convention in Byzantine period art, appearing, for example, in Ravenna. What is unusual is that the doves are suspended upside down from their sides. This fits nicely with an early tradition (*baraita*) in *Yerushalmi Bikkurim* 3:4 (65d) that suggests that the birds were

us that by analogy to the Temple, Rabbanites would not enter synagogues in a state of impurity [M. Zucker, *Rav Saadya Gaon's Translation of the Torah* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1959), p. 171, n. 666 (Hebrew)].

³¹ JT *Meg.* 3:3, 74a. On ablution of hands and feet before prayer, see N. Wieder, “Islamic Influences on the Hebrew Cults,” *Melilah* 2 (1946): 43 (Hebrew).

³² D. Barag, Y. Porat, and E. Netzer, “The Synagogue at En-Gedi,” in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. L.I. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), p. 117; On other washing installations in Palestinian synagogues, see Levine, “From Community Center to Small Temple,” pp. 39–41 and n. 26 (Hebrew).

³³ For Byzantine period examples, see E. Kitzinger, “The Threshold of the Holy Shrine: Observations on the Floor Mosaics at Antioch and Bethlehem,” in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, eds. P. Granfield, J.A. Jungmann (Muenster: Aschendorff, 1970), pp. 139–67.

³⁴ M. Avi-Yonah, “The Caesarea Inscription of the Twenty-Four Priestly Courses,” *Erez-Israel* 7 (1964): 24–28 (Hebrew); H. Eshel, “A Fragmentary Inscription of the Priestly Courses?” *Tarbiz* 61:1 (1991): 59–161 (Hebrew), has shown that an inscription from Kissufim is not a fragment of a *mishmarot* plaque.

suspended “outside” the baskets in order to maintain the cleanliness of the first fruits.³⁵ Our image of the *bikkurim* goes a step further: it seems that the birds are suspended upside down to ensure that the first fruits remain unsoiled. Similarly, the image of Aaron before the Tabernacle is not unusual. Such imagery is well known from the Greco-Roman world, where priests before altars are a common motif. I would argue that the shape of the top of the horned altar, a kind of rhombus, visually parallels the image of the ark with which it is aligned, and the three dimensional ark of the synagogue towering above. When the *sheliaḥ zibbur* stood to lead the community in prayer, he would have essentially stood, *de facto*, in the position of Aaron. This would be particularly meaningful on the festivals, and even more so at *musaf Yom ha-Kippurim*, when the prayer leader, in any event, takes the role of the High Priest in the Temple. This re-living and revitalization of the priestly service is well reflected in *piyyut* literature, a tradition that continues to our own day.³⁶ Aaron at Sepphoris is dressed, as far as we can tell, in clothing that well suits the Byzantine period, just as the youths are in the Binding of Isaac panel, and as Abraham and Isaac must have been. In a real sense, the *sheliaḥ zibbur* looked like Aaron, and Aaron looked like him.

The central register of each of our mosaics is decorated with a zodiac wheel, flanked on each corner by personifications of the four seasons. That these panels appeared over a three hundred year period is particularly exciting. In fact, the changes that took place over this period reflect the spiritual paths of differing, and in two cases, changing, Jewish communities. The earliest zodiac panel exists in the synagogue of Hammath Tiberias B. The quality of this mosaic is particularly fine. At the center of this mosaic is the image of the sun god Helios, in full regalia, riding through the heavens on

³⁵ This observation was made to me in personal correspondence by Stuart Miller shortly after the discovery of the mosaic. Cf. Weiss and Netzer, *Promise and Redemption*, p. 24.

³⁶ M. Swartz, “Sage, Priest and Poet: Typologies of Religious Leadership in the Ancient Synagogue,” in *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction During the Greco-Roman Period*, ed. S. Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 109.

his quadriga. In his hand is a staff and a globe. The image of Libra is also particularly interesting. Libra is a nude, uncircumcised male. The quality of the mosaic, and the detail of non-circumcision, led the excavator to suggest that the floor was laid by non-Jews. All that these details prove, however, is that the pattern was followed rigorously by the artisans, and that the local community found no fault in them. The image of a zodiac panel was in no way distinctly Jewish, though it seems that Jews in Palestine showed a particular preference for it.³⁷ Early on scholars recognized that this panel does not reflect strictly rabbinic norms. After all, in *Mishnah Avodah Zarah* 3:1 the Sages specifically forbid any image, *zelem*, “that has in its hand a staff or a bird or a globe (*kadur*),” and circumcision is a basic identifying feature of Jews, while public nudity was not. The dedicatory inscriptions set in the mosaic provide an answer to this mystery. All the individuals mentioned in the inscriptions bear Greek names. Not a single one has a Hebrew or Aramaic name. Twice a particular individual is mentioned, “Severos the student of the illustrious Patriarch.” Joseph Baumgarten was the first to recognize that this was a synagogue belonging to strongly Hellenized and urban members of the Patriarchal community. By the fourth century a rather wide schism had developed between the Sages and the Patriarch, and literary sources suggest that the Patriarchal circle was taking on the mores of the Roman urban elite.³⁸ It is not that they had relinquished their Jewish identity. These folks built this synagogue, with its large Torah shrine and mosaic Torah shrine panel. Like other Jews, they called their synagogue an *atra kedisha* or *hagios topos* – a “holy place.” If the synagogue inscriptions are any

³⁷ See R. Hachlili, “The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance,” *Bulletin of the American Schools for Oriental Research* 228 (1977): 62–77; G. Foerster, “The Zodiac Wheel in Ancient Synagogues and Its Iconographic Sources,” *Erez-Israel* 18 (1985): 380–91 (Hebrew). See also the zodiac mosaic from the Aegean island of Astypalaia at <http://astypalaia.com/astypalaia-frame.htm>.

³⁸ J.M. Baumgarten, “Art in the Synagogue: Some Talmudic Views,” *Judaism* 6 (1970), reprinted in my *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction During the Greco-Roman Period* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 80; L.I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1989), p. 183.

hint, their prayers used terminology well known in rabbinic sources, and they valued the Hebrew language, labeling each element of the zodiac in Hebrew (even if some inscriptions were written as mirror images). The zodiac itself is not so much of a problem, as references to the zodiac are common in rabbinic thought. Long ago Michael Avi-Yonah suggested that the zodiac represents the Jewish months, and he is certainly correct.³⁹ The presence of Helios, however, shows just how far the spirituality of this community was from rabbinic norms. Some Jews even ascribed to Helios magical power, as is suggested in a Greek prayer, transcribed into Hebrew script, that appears in a document from the Cairo Genizah.⁴⁰ When Rabbi Abun, “did not object” to the use of mosaics by Jews,⁴¹ and Rabbi Abahu was willing to prostrate himself on mosaic without any qualms of violating Leviticus 26:1,⁴² they surely could not have imagined mosaics with pagan images and nudity!⁴³ If the floor of the synagogue is any indication, the “spiritual” life of this community was clearly different from the thought-world of our Sages – though apparently only in degree and not in its totality. It was urban and sophisticated, in the provincial Roman sense. These Jews must have developed ways of explaining, or simply not noticing, Helios and the naked Libra. Nudity too was a costume in the Roman world! The local Jewish aristocracy must have been responsible for the sculpture that was covered up at the death of Nahum *ish kodesh kodeshim*, who had never looked upon

³⁹ M. Avi-Yonah, *Art in Ancient Palestine: Selected Essays*, ed. H. and Y. Tsafirir (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981), pp. 396–7. See my expanded discussion on this issue in *Art and Judaism During the Greco-Roman Period*.

⁴⁰ Opinions regarding Helios are summarized by Levine, *The Rabbinic Class*, pp. 178–9; M. Margalio’s introduction to *Sefer ha-Razim* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 1966), pp. 12–16 (Hebrew). See now S.S. Miller, “‘Epigraphical’ Rabbis, Helios, and Psalm 19: Were the Synagogues of Archaeology and the Synagogues of the Sages One and the Same?” *JQR* 94.1 (2004) 27–76.

⁴¹ *JT Avodah Zarah* 3:3, 42d, as preserved in a Cairo Genizah fragment published by J.N. Epstein, “Additional Fragments of the Jerushalmi,” *Tarbiz* 3:1 (1931): 20 (Hebrew).

⁴² *JT Avodah Zarah* 4:1, 43d; Gerald Blidstein, “Prostration and Mosaics in Talmudic Law,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 2 (1974): 33–7.

⁴³ See M. Satlow, “Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1997).

such images in his life.⁴⁴ As in all Roman cities, one would imagine that nudity was an essential element of these sculptures. Amoraic literature reports that Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi was called *Rabbenu ha-Kadosh*, because “he never looked at his circumcision, all the days of his life.”⁴⁵ The Jews of Hammath Tiberias, by contrast, looked upon the uncircumcised every time they entered their synagogue. The rabbinic warning to stay away “from the synagogues of the *amei ha-arez*”⁴⁶ was a judgment that the Sages well may have applied to the Jews who built this synagogue.

The zodiac wheel at Sepphoris reflects a more “rabbinic feel” than we find at Hammath Tiberias. Helios is gone, his image replaced with a sun disk. No nudity appears.⁴⁷ Rather, together with the signs of the zodiac, we find personifications of the Hebrew months. In essence, the possibly objectionable imagery has been cleaned up. As in Hammath Tiberias, all labels are in Hebrew. This is the case in most labels in synagogue mosaics. While dedicatory inscriptions are in Aramaic and Greek, labels for biblical scenes and the zodiac are in Hebrew. This reflects a distinctly Jewish form of spirituality that was essential to the Judaization of each of these scenes when they were carried over from the church context to the synagogue. The “holy tongue,” the “language of the holy house,” was a fundamental element of synagogue spirituality. Not always fully understood, translated into Aramaic and sometimes Greek in simultaneous translation, Hebrew was taken to be God’s vernacular.⁴⁸

The zodiac wheels at the sixth-century synagogue of Beth Alpha and Na’aran are more like Hammath Tiberias B than Sepphoris. In fact, the case may be made that the plan of Hammath Tiberias B mosaic stands in a direct line of tradition with the Beth Alpha mosaic. By the sixth century, however, paganism was dead in this part

⁴⁴ JT *Meg.* 1:11, 72b; JT *Sanh.* 10:5, 29c; JT *Avod. Zar.* 3:1, 42c; BT *Pesahim* 104a, BT *Avod. Zar.* 50a; *Eccl. Rab.* 9:10.

⁴⁵ BT *Shab.* 118b.

⁴⁶ M. *Avot* 3:10.

⁴⁷ Though the image of Gemini is incomplete, and so this point cannot be fully supported.

⁴⁸ See *This Holy Place*, pp. 15–16, and the bibliography there.

of the world, and even orthodox churches and monasteries were decorated with images of gods and goddesses. The zodiac, however, was an integral part both of midrashic literature and of the liturgy of the synagogue.⁴⁹

Still, why were these particular images chosen for synagogue decoration? The pairing of the ark panel and the zodiac was set already during the fourth century, and was followed later by the addition of biblical themes. I think that they were chosen in the first instance because they were available. Jews borrowed imagery from the general culture and Judaized it. Of all the options available, these were chosen. This is clearly the case in the Gaza region, where the self-same imagery appears in Christian and Jewish mosaics, laid by the same “school of Gaza.”⁵⁰ The only difference is the presence of a menorah or a cross before the apse of the building. Once the decision to lay a mosaic was made, the communities at Sepphoris, Beth Alpha, and Na’aran needed only to choose from a pattern “book” (which we might imagine, for the sake of argument, had been Judaized long before) what other scenes to incorporate. These were communal decisions, undoubtedly made by some sort of committee, or perhaps by the donors who financed each panel (and, at Sepphoris, have their names inscribed *in situ*).

The themes of the mosaics blended well with the liturgy of the synagogue. The interpretation of Scripture was essential to this liturgy, from the homily to the Aramaic paraphrase to the artful *kedushta*. The rich “literature of the Synagogue,” as Joseph Heine-
mann and Jakob Petuchowski have called it, ranges from homiletic

⁴⁹ See the sources cited by M. Klein, “Palestinian Targum and Synagogue Mosaics,” *Immanuel* 11 (1980): 33–45; J. Yahalom, “The Zodiac Wheel in Early Piyyut in Erez-Israel,” *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 9 (1986): 313–22 (Hebrew); “Piyyut as Poetry,” in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. L.I. Levine (Philadelphia: American Schools for Oriental Research, 1987), pp. 111–26; Shinan, “Synagogues in the Land of Israel,” 146–52.

⁵⁰ M. Avi-Yonah, *Art in Ancient Palestine: Selected Essays*, ed. H. and Y. Tsafir (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981), pp. 389–92; A. Ovadiah, “The Mosaic Workshop of Gaza in Christian Antiquity,” in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, ed. D. Urman and P.V.M. Flesher (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 367–72.

midrashic collections to liturgical texts to the Aramaic paraphrases of Scripture, the *targumim*.⁵¹ What unites all of these literatures is not only their apparent synagogue context, but their focus upon the biblical text. While it is useful to draw parallels from throughout the rabbinic corpus in interpreting individual images, this practice creates a kind of textual free-for-all when one attempts to construct a global interpretation. Fortunately, the large number of extant *piyyutim* (from the Greek *poietas*), provides a kind of control. Written by individuals, these poems can be roughly dated. The *piyyutim* differ markedly from the midrashic collections, with their long and often difficult redactional histories and their unclear *Sitz im Leben*, and the *targumim*, which were also the works of numerous hands. Reading through one poet's corpus of work, one can observe how a single Jew in late antiquity Palestine formulated and reformulated tradition within the synagogues of his day. The best example for our purposes is Yannai the Paytan, a sixth century poet. Z.M. Rabinowitz, editor of Yannai's corpus, assembled 165 poems from the Cairo Genizah that were to be recited on the Sabbath according to the so-called triennial cycle, and another fifteen or so for special days.⁵² The striking fact is that all the issues that appear in our mosaics are dealt with by Yannai. Themes that appear in the Sepphoris mosaic, including the binding of Isaac, Aaron in the Tabernacle, the table for the showbread, the first fruits, the menorah, and the zodiac all appear.⁵³ By reading how this author understands these subjects, it is possible to construct a picture of how one Jew who could well have

⁵¹ J. Heinemann and J.J. Petuchowski, *The Literature of the Synagogue*, (New York: Bloch, 1975). See A. Shinan's survey of this literature "Synagogues in the Land of Israel: The Literature of the Ancient Synagogue and Synagogue Archaeology," in *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World*, (New York: Yeshiva University Museum and Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 130–52.

⁵² *The Liturgical Poetry of Rabbi Yannai*, ed. Z.M. Rabinovitz (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1985–1987); S. Lieberman, "Hazanut Yannai," *Sinai* 4 (1939): 221–50 (Hebrew); M. Zulay, "Rabban shel ha-Paytanim," in *Eretz Israel and its Poetry*, ed. E. Hazan (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995), pp. 85–94 (Hebrew).

⁵³ For example, see *The Liturgical Poetry of Rabbi Yannai*, first fruits: vol. 2, pp. 175–82, menorah: vol. 1, pp. 340–345; zodiac 1, pp. 83–9; vol. 2, p. 242.

visited the Sepphoris synagogue understood the themes that were set in stone by the mosaicist.

I will cite here one poem by Yannai that within just a few lines utilizes many of the themes represented on the Sepphoris floor. The poem was recited on *Rosh ha-Shanah*. This extended poem, like most of Yannai's poetry, reflects upon the liturgical themes of the day as it poetically embellishes the themes of the central *tefillah* prayer that it celebrates. While I am in no way suggesting that this particular poem influenced the floor, it is my contention that the selection and arrangement of themes to decorate the Sepphoris mosaic and the selection and arrangement of themes by the liturgical poet are both reflections of how Jews constructed the synagogue environment through image and word at nearly the same time. The literary and the visual artists each assembled similar building blocks in constructing their own unique presentation for a synagogue setting. The section of Yannai's poem that concerns us translates as follows:⁵⁴

Then the *shofar* will be blown for the Complete [One]//
The hope that the complete (*shofar* blasts) be recieved like
peace offerings (*shelamim*).

Hence any *shofar* that has a crack//
Is not fit, for it interrupts the sounding.

Come forth with a broken soul and not with a broken horn//
With a broken heart and not with a broken *shofar*.

Lovers drawn after Him (God), and, like the girdle, cleave//
They will sound a long *shofar* that has no adhesions.

For from the ram come the horns//
To remember the merit of the ram stuck by its horns [at the
binding of Isaac].

⁵⁴ *The Liturgical Poetry of Rabbi Yannai*, vol. 2, p. 204.

Sound, O sons of God/ Sound to the God of gods//
Who covers over and removes/from them all sins.

A time of concealment when the moon is concealed/
To conceal sins well, just as the moon [is concealed].

The sun, how can it bear witness [to the new month]
alone?/
When one witness is not enough [for a court] to inflict the
death penalty?

The [heavenly] array of the seventh month, its constellation
is Libra/
For sin and righteousness God will lay upon the scales.

His hand will remove sin and we will proclaim the day with
the *shofar*/
To the scale of utter righteousness He will incline.

We see here that the themes of the *shofar*, the binding of Isaac, the sun, moon and astronomical symbols are among the building blocks for Yannai's *Rosh ha-Shanah* liturgy. Elsewhere in his corpus, Yannai weaves these themes and many others together in different ways, depending upon the reading for the day and the festival context. It is important to note, however, that the binding of Isaac, representing the doctrine of "merits of the ancestors,"⁵⁵ the zodiac, representing both the heavens and the Jewish solar-lunar calendar, and the sacrificial system, are extremely common throughout Yannai's corpus, due to their centrality within the *tefillah* prayer upon which our author artistically expands. Yannai, reflecting upon the Scriptural readings of *Rosh ha-Shanah*, upon the ceremonies of that day, and upon the calendrical cycle, brought together imagery that gives texture to his liturgical creation. That all of this imagery ap-

⁵⁵ Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), pp. 170–98; G.F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927–1930), vol. 1, pp. 538–46.

pears in our floor is no accident. These themes were central to Jewish liturgical life during this period. At other seasons Yannai stresses other subjects, many of which are expressed in our synagogue mosaics. The Menorah, for example, is the subject of Yannai's Hanukkah and liturgical poems for *parshat be-ha'lotekha*. On *Tisha be-Av* the Tabernacle/Temple is dealt with differently than on *Sukkot*, and on and on. One might even conjecture that on various occasions the synagogue was furnished differently. We know that this was the case in contemporary churches, and among Jews in Geonic Babylonia.⁵⁶ Why should this not have been the case in Jewish Palestine? As we dress the synagogue in white for the *Yamim ha-Nora'im*, and in flowers for *Shavuot*, perhaps ancient Jews had their own distinctive ways of decorating their synagogues throughout the year. The various elements of the synagogue, the visual, the textual, and the human actors, were as so many molecules, interacting with one another in different ways at different seasons and in different contexts. The art and the liturgy of the synagogue are cut from a single cloth, reflecting differing, but always interwoven, aspects of the spirituality of the synagogue in Byzantine Palestine.

Not all late antique Jews considered the art of our ancient synagogues to be conducive to their spiritual needs. We have suggested, for example, that the Sages would likely not have been pleased with the decorations of the fourth-century Hammath Tiberias synagogue mosaic. Apparently Jews in the same locale during the sixth century were not either. When they rebuilt and enlarged their synagogue, the later builders made no effort to reuse or copy their earlier mosaics. They laid a floor of simple patterns and built right through the zodiac mosaic. At Khirbet Susiya, in the Mt. Hebron area, a zodiac and an image of Daniel were replaced with a simple geometric pattern of tesserae. Images of animals on the synagogue's *bima* screens were removed. There are many other examples. The Jews of Na'aran carefully removed the human and most animal images that appeared in their mosaic. The Jews of Ein Gedi included the zodiac in the

⁵⁶ A. Yaari, *The History of the Festival of Simḥat Torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1964), p. 215 (Hebrew); J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels to the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Ariel and Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1981), pp. 82–4.

decoration of their synagogue, but only in the form of a list; and the Jews of Jericho, only a few kilometers from Na'aran, laid a floor with images of a stylized geometric Torah that included only images of a shrine and a *menorah*.⁵⁸ I could list many other examples of aniconic or iconoclastic behavior, and, in fact, have done so elsewhere.⁵⁹ The point here is that during the Byzantine and early Islamic periods there were Jewish communities who found the kind of imagery that we have discussed to be fundamentally contrary to their own sense of spirituality. As Nahum *ish kodesh kodashim* never looked on a pagan image on a coin, these Jews tried not to either – at least not within their synagogues.

What influenced this transformation? Goodenough and Avi-Yonah attributed it to the rising power of those big-bad-iconophobic-rabbis. Avi-Yonah's disappointment, as well as his own anti-rabbinism, is palpable when he writes that:⁶⁰

The figurative efflorescence of Jewish Art, which began in the third century, did not last beyond the sixth. As the times became more difficult and the Byzantine laws directed against

⁵⁷ M. Dothan, *Hammath Tiberias: Late Synagogues* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000)

⁵⁸ J. Sussman, "A Halakhic Inscription from the Beth-Shean Valley," *Tarbiz* 43 (1973–74): 88–158, 44 (1974–75), pp. 193–5 (Hebrew).

⁵⁹ "Iconoclasm and the Art of Late Antique Palestinian Synagogues," In *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity*, ed. L.I. Levine and Z. Weiss, *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series* (1999) 182–93.

⁶⁰ M. Avi-Yonah, *Oriental Art in Roman Palestine* (Rome: Centro di Studi Semitici of the Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, 1961), p. 42, reprinted *Art in Ancient Palestine*, p. 159. See the secularized Christian statement of this as related to iconoclasm in E.R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), vol. 2, pp. 256–7. Regarding iconoclasm at Na'aran, Goodenough states: "again, we might suppose that the 'different type' of Judaism was rabbinic, halakhic Judaism at last coming to dominate Jewish standards and conceptions, at last becoming normative." On Goodenough's understanding of the rabbinic sages, see: M. Smith, "Goodenough's Jewish Symbols in Retrospect," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 53–68; *Fine Art and Judaism During the Greco Roman Period, part I*.

the Jews more oppressive, aniconic orthodoxy resumed its sway, even before similar trends prevailed in Islam and in the iconoclastic tendency at Byzantium.... The old fear of the human image returned again, as in Hellenistic times....

In effect, this interpretation is the other side of the coin from Rabbi Soloveitchik's comment that "[T]he tradition as such has rejected them (that is, figurative mosaics)." What is clear is that the Jews who chose against visual images during the Byzantine period clearly were choosing a path that veered away from the artistic traditions that we have seen thus far. Were they responding to the Christian veneration of images? When an Aramaic-speaking poet wrote against Christian images of Jesus "painted on wood," he certainly reflects an abhorrence for such images.⁶¹ Still, there is a great distance between an image set in two dimensions in a mosaic or carved in low relief on a lintel and the Christian cult of the saints. The rise of Islam was significant for Jewish aniconism and iconoclasm. From the first, Islam eschewed images within religious settings. Islamic aesthetics must have been particularly influential among Jews. The Moslem rulers of Palestine were greeted positively by Palestinian Jews, and Islam was not subjected to the level of scorn that Jews felt (and continued to feel) toward Christianity.⁶² Jewish wariness of idolatrous imagery proved to be an asset for Jews living in a Muslim society. In

⁶¹ Nailed on the wood [the cross, *kis*]
And my image in the church [*ba-Merkoles*]
Is painted on wood [*kis*]

M. Sokoloff and J. Yahalom, *Jewish Palestinian Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity: Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1999), p. 217 (Hebrew).

⁶² See R. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 216–32, and my "Non-Jews in the Synagogues of Palestine," pp. 231–41, and the bibliography cited there. On relations between Jews, Christians, and Moslems on the subject of Christian images, see G.R.D. King, "Islam, Iconoclasm and the Declaration of Doctrine," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48:2 (1985): 275–7; S.H. Griffith, *Theodore Abu Qurrah, A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), esp. pp. 6–7.

a sense, it gave the Jews “one up” on the Christians and the appearance of being closer in attitude to the Moslems in this multi-cultural, though increasingly Islamic, culture. The intrinsic ambivalence of rabbinic tradition toward images certainly provided ready ground for this shift, leading to the iconographic transformation of synagogue floors. We might assume that Palestinian Jews would have had no particular interest in continuing to use a now *passé* art form. Jews simply adopted and adapted the aesthetics of the new colonial power. According to this scenario, the close of antiquity and the rise of Islam reinforced a less figurative sensibility than had existed in Jewish thought in the Land of Israel throughout the Greco-Roman period. Jewish attitudes reflect the transition from a visual vocabulary to a less figurative approach, that some (though not all) Jewish communities found to their liking in the Byzantine Holy Land. In the end, the most significant non-Jewish influences were clearly the artistic and religious mores of Islamic Palestine.

In this paper I have suggested that the art of ancient synagogues was part-and-parcel of the period as a whole, and that Jews were essentially consumers of Byzantine and early Islamic artistic forms. In taking on and Judaizing the art of this period, Jews created an art that was uniquely Jewish. “Spirituality” may be found in synagogue art at the point that it intersects with the liturgy of the ancient synagogue. If the life of the synagogue was the play, then the synagogue building was the set. The set developed with the changing attitudes of the community, and with the aesthetics of each community and succeeding era. In eschewing and often removing the selfsame imagery, communities made a very different Jewish choice, a move toward a less figurative iconography that has been a defining feature of much (though certainly not all) synagogue art from the early Islamic period to our own. This transition generally sits well with Rabbi Soloveitchik’s notion that Judaism holds “an unequivocal iconoclastic attitude...toward the display of human images in houses of worship.”⁶³

⁶³ Letter on the Cornell interfaith chapel, p. 2. Although Rav Soloveitchik, like many contemporary scholars, uses the word “iconclastic” broadly to describe both material *and* spiritual non-figurative representation.