Approaches to Sacred Space in the Pre-modern Synagogue

# Introduction

How did the late ancient to pre-modern spaces of Jewish prayer imply sacredness, or in which ways architects and artists charged the synagogue spaces with notions of the sacred? What are the proper intellectual tools to detect the ideas underlying the notion of sanctity in synagogue architecture and art? These and similar questions occupied the minds of historians, archaeologists, researchers of religion, architecture, and visual culture since the mid-1980s.

Despite the lack of archaeological and epigraphic evidence prior to the third century B.C.E, the synagogue origins were variously dated to the times of Solomon’s kingdom through the Babylonian exile to the Hellenistic period. Recent scholarship propounded a gradual evolution of Jewish places of assembly for social, religious, and liturgical activities in Judea and the Diaspora of the Hellenistic and Roman times to the buildings imparted with a sense of holiness.[[1]](#footnote-1) To mention but several of those who purposefully investigated synagogue sanctity, they were Baruch M. Bokser (1945–1990), Joan R. Branham, Steven Fine, Lee I. Levine, Jack N. Lightstone, Gary A. Rendsburg (all North-American-based, many with Israeli education or academic experience), Martin Goodman (British), and Rina Talgam (Israeli). As we will see below, their main effort regarding the issues of sanctity was invested into the studies of formative and early periods of synagogue history. So far, the corpus of monographs, chapters, and articles narrowly targeted at the visual manifestations of sanctity in synagogues is moderate-sized in comparison to the plethora of publications on the synagogue archaeology, architecture, and art in late antiquity and to the steadily growing scholarship on medieval and early modern synagogue architecture and art.[[2]](#footnote-2) Other inferences related to sanctity are scattered in wider-themed works on Jewish history, thought, architecture, and art. I pursue tracing the trajectories of analytical thought on the constructs and perceptions of sacredness in synagogues throughout this medley, with full awareness of my art-historian stance.

Contemporary anthropology, sociology, and religion studies commonly employ the dichotomy of sacred versus profane, which Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), and Mircea’s Eliade (1907–1986) postulated archetypal for any religion.[[3]](#footnote-3) Their generalizing binary definition of “sacred” is instrumental for the synagogue sacred space studies, but it dovetails only a part of the connotations of this term, its derivatives, and synonyms in the variety of languages used by Jews through the ages[[4]](#footnote-4) and expressed in many other dimensions and hierarchies.[[5]](#footnote-5) We also count the scholarly approaches to “sacredness” as a manifestation of the transcendent in the mundane world, the phenomenon described by Eliade as “hierophany.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This connotation blends with the meaning of “holiness” referred to in Jewish sources as *kodesh* or *kedushah* (biblical and mishnaic Hebrew, respectively: holiness). Supposedly derived from the common Semitic root *q-d-š* (Akkadian: to be pure, purify, clean), the *kodesh* and *kadosh* (holy, sacred) were used in the Bible and understood by rabbinical exegetes and scholars not only as “distinguished, set apart, dedicated,” but also as an attribute and eminence of the Divine.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Unlike the theologians who occupy with holiness as the matter of God’s sanction and supreme truth, scholars operate with the human perceptions and expressions of sanctity. As Douglas Marshall conceptualized it, “sacredness is […] a perceived property of some object or class of objects.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The mental constructs are elusive; after they have vanished, their imprints may survive in texts and tangible objects, which also are not but a vestigial remnant of the lost entirety.[[9]](#footnote-9) With the voices calling for reading the texts and images as equally informative and mutually complementary, the two bodies of evidence are largely treated with different degrees of certainty. Art and architecture are often considered ambiguous testimonies for abstract thoughts unless the interpretations of images, forms and spaces are being affirmed by culturally and chronologically related texts.[[10]](#footnote-10)

# Nomenclature and Epigraphy

Synagogue attendees and patrons, builders and decorators, Jewish sages and Christian theologians, halakhic authorities and imperial legislators, advocates and adversaries of Judaism referred to synagogues in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. Scholars treated the synagogue names and epithets containing definitions ἅγιος or ἱερός(Greek: “holy,” “sacred”), and קדישא(Aramaic: “holy”) as an indubitable indication that the Jews regarded these places holy.[[11]](#footnote-11) Goodman’s reading of these terms in their particular ideological, political, and religious contexts challenged one’s sweeping trust in nomenclature. [[12]](#footnote-12) He observed that, on the one hand, the gentiles assigned their concept of veneration of sacred places to the Jewish houses of prayer and religious meetings, and the meaning of solemn Greek words was ambiguous in the late-Roman usage. On the other hand, neither rabbinic sages nor non-rabbinic authorities posed any coherent rationale for their attitudes to synagogue sacrality. Goodman suggested that the most reliable source is the synagogue epigraphy. He claimed, “The clearest evidence that some Jews treated synagogues as sacred space comes not from rabbinic discussions nor from the architecture of the synagogue buildings, but from the inscriptions found within those buildings.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Relying on that epigraphy, Goodman concluded that the synagogue sites could be treated by Jews as holy, while the attitudes greatly varied.[[14]](#footnote-14)

# Religious Performance, Tangible Settings, and Visual Displays

The synagogue sanctity was discussed in its human and material dimensions. Paradigmatic is Lee I. Levine’s indication of the sanctity of ancient synagogues intermediately – by their roles as religious institutions that distinctly emancipated from the prevalence of communal functions, and as venues for religious art.[[15]](#footnote-15) He deemed the sanctity of buildings a projection of their sacred contents, either material (holy objects) or performative (public prayer, reading of sacred books, ritual meals, collecting donations).[[16]](#footnote-16) In this concern, Goodman expanded that the very performance of communal prayer in synagogues might cast a holy aura upon the building.[[17]](#footnote-17) Levine argued that since the third century C.E., the permanent presence of the Torah scrolls heightened the synagogue sanctity; their storage was secured in niches, apses, or arks, and their reading was furnished by bimahs.[[18]](#footnote-18) The images illustrating the Hebrew Bible underpinned the synagogues’ religious function.[[19]](#footnote-19) Avoiding decisive stance regarding diverse and competitive interpretations of this art, Levine admitted that the images and symbols were “mobilized to serve the cultural, religious, and psychological needs of Jewish communities.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

# Temple to Synagogue

Of the issues relating to synagogue sanctity in pre-modern Synagogue, perhaps the most scholarly effort was invested in exploring the transmission of the notion of sacred from the Temple to synagogues. The biblical *beit ha-Mikdash* (Hebrew: the Temple; literally, “the Holy House”) in Jerusalem celebrated its holiness as the only mundane abode of Divine Presence and the unique *axis* and *omphalos mundi*.[[21]](#footnote-21) The affairs in the oldest synagogues run in parallel to the cult of sacrifices in the Second Temple and, as Goodman contended, some Jews even then saw their synagogues as sacred places.[[22]](#footnote-22) The crystallization of both synagogue institution and notion of its sanctity was dramatically fostered by and in many ways responded to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.[[23]](#footnote-23)

## *Downscaling Sanctity*

The third-century Amoraic Rabbi Samuel son of Isaac’s identification of synagogues as the *mikdash me‘at* (“lesser Sanctuary” or “small Temple”) mentioned in Ezekiel 11:16 (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 29a) became a commonplace in scholarly discourses about the relations of the synagogue’s sanctity as downscaled or vicarious in relation to the Temple’s one. Levine affirmed the regnant scholarly refutation of an anachronistic association of the “lesser Sanctuary” with some synagogues that could exist in Ezekiel’s during the Babylonian captivity. He redirected our attention to probable homiletical purposes of Rabbi Samuel, who obviously sanctified the synagogues of his times.[[24]](#footnote-24) Fine explored more evidence from Amoraic and post-Amoraic literature, liturgy, and synagogue art, concluding that these sources betray “no overt attempts to limit the templization of synagogues and study houses.”[[25]](#footnote-25) The explanatory theories also embraced the opposition of other second- to third-century Jewish sages (in Babylonian *Avodah Zarah* 43a and parallels) to replicating of the Temple and its parts, even when the synagogue design often ignored the rabbinical prohibition of precise copying the Temple’s seven-branched menorah.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The discovery of a stone ashlar carved with the seven-branched menorah and Temple-related symbols in the first-century C.E. synagogue at Magdala (now Migdal; near the Sea of Galilee) in 2009 had shaken the predisposition toward dating the references to Temple’s sanctity in “lesser sanctuaries” to the times after the Temple’s destruction.[[27]](#footnote-27) Talgam’s initial identification of the Magdala stone as a stand for the Torah scroll substantiated the conjectures on the pivotal part of the Torah reading and public exposure of the Torah scroll in the synagogue “in the age of transition.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Talgam argued that in the times of the Herodian Temple, the Magdala assembly used the decorated ashlar as a stand for the Torah scroll, and the entire installation to intimate the Temple’s sanctity in their synagogue. The substantial reliance of her inferences on semantic analysis of images and architectural forms challenged some entrenched approaches to visual aspects of archaeological finds as slippery evidence fraught of overinterpretation.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Caution increasingly preponderated the thoughts about the allusion to synagogue sanctity implicit in the “lesser Sanctuary” definition. Goodman wrote: “A straightforward attribution to synagogues of the sanctity that the now defunct Jerusalem Temple had once had might have been possible but does not seem to have happened.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Levine generalized that the main lesson of Rabbi Samuel’s dictum is its ambiguity, for the “lesser Sanctuary” quintessentially formulated the Amoraic ambivalence of accepting the synagogue as sacred – but less so than the Jerusalem Temple, and as “Temple-like” – but not a Temple’s equivalent.[[31]](#footnote-31)

## Cognitive Drama or Reconciled Memory?

The discrepancy between the proclaimed rabbinical prohibition of exact replication of the Temple and its implements, and the actual conflated perception of the sacred space in the Temple and synagogues became a telic inquiry in Joan R. Branham’s works. She employed semiotic constructs to solve this – in her words – “cognitive drama.”[[32]](#footnote-32) She applied Jonathan Z. Smith’s (1938–2017) terms of “locative” (centralized) vs. “utopian” (dispersed) sacred geography to the transition from the Temple cult to synagogue worship.[[33]](#footnote-33) In Branham’s opinion, the competitive relationships between the synagogue and the Temple’s legacy can be described by a deanthropologized adaption of René Girard’s (1923–2015) concept of religious sacrifice as a rivalry over sacrality.[[34]](#footnote-34) Branham contended that the synagogue became the place of vicarious Temple’s sacrality that may be explained by the word “Temple” written under erasure. Her “writing under erasure” adopted Jacques Derrida’s (1930–2004) and Jean-Luc Marion’s usage of this graphic sign for conveying in script the ineffability and endless *différance* (difference and deferral) of meaning.[[35]](#footnote-35)

 Rendsburg approached the conflict between the vicarious sanctity and exclusive holiness in Jewish communities of the Greco-Roman and Byzantine periods as a different kind of multileveled experience in which the real synagogue space intermingled with a virtual space of the lost Temple.[[36]](#footnote-36) This theory is reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s (1926–1984) heterotopia, a concept of real venues that mentally mirror “other” spaces.[[37]](#footnote-37) Rendsburg particularized: the synagogue liturgy, decorum, architecture, and art imparted the congregants with a sense of being “transported to the temple [–Temple] of old, now destroyed, but still alive within the communal memory.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

 Fine distinguished between the historical layers of sacrality. He proposed that the Jewish perception of holiness bifurcated after the Temple’s destruction, which marked a watershed between the sacral past and flawed “this time” in the Jewish vision of history. Thus, the sacrality attributed to the synagogues of that age inherited little or no cosmic significance of the Temple’s holiness.[[39]](#footnote-39)

## Ritual and Taboo

Avenues of the synagogue sanctity research led to the comparison of ritualized human behaviors in synagogues and the Temple. Scholarly opinion commonly held that many rules for intended conduct in synagogues echoed the devotional, ritual, or cultic gestures that celebrated the Temple’s holiness.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Researchers posed the reminiscences of the Temple’s priestly service in the synagogue rite as the historical constructs of sanctity adopted in the post-Temple reality.[[41]](#footnote-41) Levine accounted the priestly performances, both liturgical (e.g., blessings) and ritual, in ancient synagogues.[[42]](#footnote-42) The Temple-rooted priestly rituals included washing hands before blessings, offering the blessings barefoot, and spreading the fingers when blessing (supposedly, also a Temple’s practice).[[43]](#footnote-43) Maintaining observance of the old-time rites, synagogues often located near natural water sources or pools of spring- or rainwater that were used for purification of the body.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Much research was aimed at the synagogue prayer as “verbal sacrifice” that substituted for the animal sacrifice in the Temple.[[45]](#footnote-45) For instance, Michael Swartz asserted that the liturgical evocation of the disrupted sacrificial system became a pivotal performative recreation of the disrupted Temple’s cult in synagogues.[[46]](#footnote-46)

In addition to the exclusively priestly gestures and liturgical references to the Temple, the prerequisites of ritual purity and ablutions for everyone entering the sacred space, or tabooing the menstruants were occasionally practiced in ancient synagogues.[[47]](#footnote-47) The issue of the gender-based taboo as a marker of sacred domains requires further notes.[[48]](#footnote-48) The discussions of separate seating of men and women in ancient synagogues commonly referred to the texts saying that females were not allowed beyond the Women’s Court, but there was no strict separation of the sexes within the Women’s Court. The exception was a temporary separation to prevent licentious behavior of the participants in the Water Drawing Ceremony of Sukkot Festival.[[49]](#footnote-49) For the recent half a century, the scholarly consensus was that the reservation of areas for men only at the Temple and its courts had had no detectable effect on the architectural layout of ancient synagogues where man and women were together in the same prayer hall.[[50]](#footnote-50) Chad Spigel challenged the mainstream strive for defining the standard mode of gender policy in ancient synagogues. He stressed that the literary, archaeological, and cultural sources suggested diversity and precluded neither mixed nor separated seating of women and men in synagogues. Spigel proposed that while in many synagogues men and women prayed in the same space, other synagogues relegated women to balconies or galleries, or separated them by barriers. Even when separated, the female worshippers kept certain visual and full aural contact with the male-conducted service.[[51]](#footnote-51) The hypothesis is bolstered by Fine’s example of reed barriers in front of women listening to a male speaker at the synagogue bimah.[[52]](#footnote-52)

The modern scholarly enquiries for the gender aspects of medieval synagogue sanctity were disposed towards the Ashkenazi communities. Ismar Elbogen (1874–1943) was obviously the first to acknowledge the shift from the earlier mixed seating to the rigorous gender separation in early Ashkenazi synagogues.[[53]](#footnote-53) Simon Paulus itemized the thirteenth-century construction of a *Frauenshule* abutting the synagogue in Worms, Speyer, Cologne, and more Jewish communities.[[54]](#footnote-54) Textual and pictorial evidence implied that a curtain or screen divided between the sexes in single-hall synagogues.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Among the various social, economic, and religious explanations proposed for allotting separate spaces for women in medieval German synagogues, the notion of ritual purity is pertinent to our preoccupation with synagogue sanctity. A *mikveh*, bath for ritual purification, was often found in proximity to the synagogue entrance.[[56]](#footnote-56) Elisheva Baumgarten has related the denounced entering the synagogue by menstruant or parturient women to the coinciding rise of physical separation of sexes in Ashkenazi synagogues.[[57]](#footnote-57) Jeffrey Woolf proposed that such rigorous observation of bodily purity revived the Temple’s rules of purity and thereby attested to the “unstated values of contemporary Ashkenaz, in this case the identity of the Synagogue with the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Studies asserted that the pendulum had slowly swung again towards more tolerant, though still segregating attitude of women in later medieval and early modern synagogues. Researchers who sought for a progressist generalization of this process focused on the examples that indicated the development of women’s sections from “women’s synagogues” at side annexes to galleries or balconies integrated into the synagogue’s main volume.[[59]](#footnote-59)

## Transposing Devotion

Now we turn to the inquiries on how the formal and material aspects of architecture imparted synagogues with a sense of sanctity derived from or appealing to sanctity of the Temple. The search for the architectural agents extending sacredness from the Temple as a unique and notional *locus sanctus* over its tangible imitations in synagogues gravitated to the theory of iconography in Christian medieval architecture introduced by Richard Krautheimer (1897–1994) in the 1940s.[[60]](#footnote-60) Phenomenological premises for the architectural studies of sanctity were elaborated by Michel Foucault (1926–84), who has described such capability of architecture to evoke a feeling of simultaneous presence in both local and remote places as *heterotopia*;[[61]](#footnote-61) and Smith, who contended that religious consciousness could transpose devotion, awe, enlightenment, or catharsis intrinsic of visitation in the unique sacred place onto its architectural representations.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Search for visual and spatial references to the Temple in pre-modern synagogue architecture yielded numerous inferences. Rendsburg has assumed that three gates at the front façade of Galilean synagogues of the Byzantine period at replicated the triple-gate entranceway at southern side of the Temple Mount.[[63]](#footnote-63) Branham has interpreted the so-called “chancel screens” in front of the Torah ark in the Byzantine-time synagogues as a reproduction of balustrades in the Herodian temple.[[64]](#footnote-64) Annette Weber and I similarly sensed that the idea of sacrificial altar in the Jerusalem Temple underlay the construction of a high enclosure around the bimah in medieval Ashkenazi synagogues.[[65]](#footnote-65) Wischnitzer has asserted that an ingenious rephrase of a Hebrew biblical verse on one of the two of pillars in the prayer hall of the Worms synagogue (1174/75) associated them with the columns Jakhin and Boaz in the Temple of Solomon.[[66]](#footnote-66) Woolf has applied Smith’s theory to Ashkenazi synagogues and, in particular, to early modern Torah shrines, the design of which related to the Temple in Jerusalem. He connected these references to the re-enactment of historical rituals and decorum in the Temple to a perception of synagogues as “lesser Sanctuaries”.[[67]](#footnote-67)

## Miniaturizing the Sanctum

A few scholars dealt with Jewish miniaturized reproductions of the Temple. At the universal level, Smith accentuated that while any scale of architectural replicas are transposing the sense of sanctity, the downscaled models of the sacred samples increase “tendency towards abstraction, which grows greater as the overall size of the replica decreases.”[[68]](#footnote-68) Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1908–2009) distinguished the difference in perception of real-size and downscaled architecture: “in the case of miniatures, […] knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Miniaturization transmutes architectural constructions from spacious venues to compact objects that can be grasped at a glance and comprehended in its totality more promptly than the life-size buildings, which are fully perceived only through one’s routing through and around them.

In archaeological terms, Yosef Garfinkel and Madeleine Mumcuoglu shed light on the application of ancient near-eastern practices of creating diminished replicas of sacred edifices for the ritual sake by Israelites, who produced miniaturized models of the Jerusalem Temple.[[70]](#footnote-70) Rina Talgam interpreted a stone block carved with Temple-related symbols in the first-century C.E. synagogue at Magdala (now Migdal; near the Sea of Galilee) as a volumetric index (in semiotic terms) of the Temple’s sanctum. The discovery of this artifact in 2009 provided a glimpse onto a hitherto unacknowledged visual expression of sanctity in synagogues of Greco-Roman age.[[71]](#footnote-71) Talgam argued that the Magdala assembly used the decorated ashlar as a stand for the Torah scroll, and the entire installation emulated the Temple’s sanctity in a synagogue that acted in the times of the Herodian Temple. Talgam’s theory shook the belief that the “Templization” of synagogues had not occurred before the Temple’s destruction, and her methodological premises challenged some entrenched doubts in the ability of visual analysis to explain archaeological evidence sufficiently enough.[[72]](#footnote-72)

## Relics

Historians of architecture and culture elucidated the symbolic use of spolia in public and religious buildings from the Roman Empire to medieval Christendom for bolstering of the succession of past glory, veneration, or holiness in the present.[[73]](#footnote-73) Tales claimed that certain artifacts from the First or Second Temple in Jerusalem had survived. Researchers presumed that in those stories, the homiletic intentions overrode historical evidence. Thus, Ra‘anan S. Boustan suggested that from the rabbinical discourse about the Temple vessels on display in post-70 C.E. Rome to contemporary post-Zionist historical science, analysis of this discourse betrays the ideological and religious tensions between the visions of Jerusalem-centered and diasporic Judaism.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Legends narrated that whereas the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple’s golden Menorah were mysteriously hidden,[[75]](#footnote-75) some other parts or materials remained available for their secondary use. John Ward-Perkins (1912–1981) explored the reuse of helical columns attributed to second-century C. E. Greece as believed spolia of the Temple of Solomon in Constantine the Great’s St. Peter’s Basilica (4th century).[[76]](#footnote-76) Over and above their role as a synecdoche of the hallowed original, the presence of architectural relics (ether genuine or reputed) in indigenous ritual settings collapsed the gape in time and space between their beholders and remote *loci sancti*. The implants of spolia in the local prayer house made its building an extension of the legendary edifice. Seeing and touching the objects that belonged to the famed sanctuary were also a trouble-saving substitute for pilgrimage to the sacred location.

Certain observations were devoted to the phenomenon of borrowing the sanctity of destroyed Temple by incorporating its remnants in the synagogue structure. Joseph Gutmann (1923–2004) scrutinized a story told by Sherira ben Ḥanina (acted 968–98), the Gaon of Pumbedita, about the Israelite exiles to Babylon, who took with them earth and stones from the ruins of the Temple of Solomon and used these materials for the foundations of the synagogue of Nehardea.[[77]](#footnote-77)

The tales about a synagogue incorporating Temple’s remains circulated across the Jewish Diaspora and offered etiological legends for particular synagogues.[[78]](#footnote-78) Vered Tohar collected and classified the narrations on sanctity of the Temple dispersed by its stones. Tohar summarized the archetypical motif of sanctity’s exile that like the Jewish expulsion to be ended in its miraculous return to the Holy Land. First, the sacred relics were either wandered on their own or were brought from Jerusalem by the exiles or angels. Then the parts of the destroyed Temple were incorporated in the synagogue structure on condition that when the Messiah comes, the Jews remove these stones and return them to the restored Temple.[[79]](#footnote-79)

# Sanctity Structured

Unavoidably resonating the dichotomy of the centripetal concept of Temple’s sanctity and centrifugal sanctity of synagogues, the spatial and positional aspects of the sacred in the latter architecture has become a particular target of scholarly exploration.

## Theophany

Thoughts about the critical turn from the Temple’s uniqueness to multiplicity of synagogues involved the question of what happened to the *Shekhinah* (divine presence), core and salient force of the Temple’s sanctity, after the Temple was destroyed. Uri Ehrlich accounted the scenarios of the human-divine encounter that passed from the Temple to synagogues,[[80]](#footnote-80) and Swartz described the synagogue ritual as a recreation of dramatic empathy with witnessing the reflection of the divine presence in the Temple.[[81]](#footnote-81) There was no rabbinical agreement about the point of whether the *Shekhinah* departed from the Temple’s precincts. Nevertheless, one opinion held that the synagogue worshipers should direct their prayer to a remote focus: the Temple’s location which continued to be a portal to God’s heavenly abode. Other rabbinical voices suggested that divine presence appeared in close proximity to the worshipper: “He who prays should regard himself as if the *Shekhinah* were before him (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 22a).[[82]](#footnote-82)

Joseph Sievers highlighted the performative aspect of invoking divine presence: an assembly of ten men or even a smaller gathering for a heavenly sake were believed to guarantee God’s presence among them.[[83]](#footnote-83) Levine demonstrated that the sages anchored the mystery of heavenly presence with ten male worshippers (constituting a *minyan*, the quorum for Jewish collective prayer) in a synagogue.[[84]](#footnote-84) Fine elaborated on the Babylonian topos of divine presence that followed Israel into exile and attended the synagogues and rabbinical academies. God’s sojourn imbued the synagogues and houses of Torah study with sanctity. Some Amoraic sages considered the study house even holier than the synagogue. More intensive visitations of divine presence to chosen synagogues (the *Huẓal* and *Shaf ve-Yativ* in Nehardea) could attribute to them a higher degree of holiness.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Branham suggested that the artistic decoration of the Dura Europos and Bet Alpha synagogues implied the sense that Eliade called divine “rupture”.[[86]](#footnote-86) Fine imagined the believers’ sense of immediate encounter with invisible Shekhinah, when they gazed at the Torah scrolls in the opened synagogue ark.[[87]](#footnote-87) I proposed that the architectural forms, symbols, and inscriptions of the ark and bimah in from to early modern European synagogues alluded to divine presence dwelling in or emanating into the place of prayer.[[88]](#footnote-88) Since the sixteenth century, some decorated synagogue arks represented the Sinaitic revelation of the Torah, so that taking the Torah scroll out of the ark could symbolically reenact the biblical event on front of the worshippers’ eyes.[[89]](#footnote-89)

## Hierophany

Revising the Eliadean immutable and mental hierophany, the studies of synagogue sanctity explored the dynamic processes and material agencies that implied manifestation of the transcendent. Steven Fine tackled on the evolution of the Torah scroll as the synagogue sacred nucleus.[[90]](#footnote-90) Susan Haber (1957–2006) assumed that the sacred scroll might have been perceived as importing sanctity to either the synagogue building or its assembly.[[91]](#footnote-91) The veneration of the Torah scroll and its salient role in the synagogue space emerged within wider religious and social settings of Greco-Roman cults: in particular, Karel van der Toorn and Goodman pointed out the resemblance of Jewish treatment of the Torah scrolls and pagan veneration of idols.[[92]](#footnote-92) Fine paralleled the formation of the pivotal position of a movable sacred object – the Torah scroll – in the Scripture-centered Jewish meeting houses and the development of “movable holiness” in the not temple-based polytheist communities discussed by Smith.[[93]](#footnote-93)

Fine accentuated that the increasing significance of reading and learning the Scripture in the synagogues acted after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. marked them as the realm of the Torah and caused codification of the synagogue attendees’ proper decorum. The sages prohibited any inappropriate behavior in presence of the sacred scrolls as well as any utilitarian benefits derived from attending the synagogue. Nice adornment of the Torah scroll, its receptacle, and table for its reading designated the religious value of these objects,[[94]](#footnote-94) and inscriptions on them or nearby demanded pious behavior towards the Scripture. Fine quoted an example of the latter kind: the Greek inscription “Find, open, read [– the Scripture], observe [– God’s commandments]” from the synagogue in Sardis.[[95]](#footnote-95)

In synagogues, the scroll bearing the divinely revealed Law mediated the miracle of Sinaitic revelation from the legendary biblical past to the present times, and conveyed it from the imagination to sensible reality.[[96]](#footnote-96) Since the sixteenth century, some decorated synagogue arks represented the Sinaitic revelation of the Torah, so that taking the Torah scroll out of the ark could symbolically reenact the biblical event on front of the worshippers’ eyes.[[97]](#footnote-97)

Julian Obermann, Lightstone, and Fine accounted unaccustomed synagogue practices that coincided the common reverence for the Torah sanctity. The supernatural powers were attributed to an apotropaic drawing and human bones (most likely, also believed possessing protective powers) found in the Dura-Europos synagogue (active ca. 244–57 C.E.) in Syria and to amulets kept in later synagogues in the Holy Land.[[98]](#footnote-98) Reminiscent of the Christian cult of saints, another local variation of synagogue sanctity – now derived from human relics – was attributed to the “Synagogue of the Maccabean Martyrs” in Antioch on the Orontes.[[99]](#footnote-99)

## Hierarchy

The studies of synagogue sanctity reveal the perception of holiness as a hierarchic system. Fine exploited the Mishnaic discourse about the bargains with religious property to reconstruct the concept of concentric sanctity radiating from the Torah scroll stored and read in synagogues. The sanctity gradually diminished as moved away from the Torah scroll to, consequently, other biblical books, cloths wrapping the scroll, a scroll chest, synagogue building, and town square. Tannaic rabbis disagreed about the sustainability of sanctity: some described the holiness remaining in a synagogue even after it converted for a secular use, another believed that sanctity was functional (when the community abandoned the synagogue, the building was no longer sacred).[[100]](#footnote-100)

Branham interpreted the so-called “chancel screens” in front of the Torah ark or a *bimah* as an architectural marker of semantic division of the prayer hall in the Holy Land synagogues of the Byzantine period. She traced this lore back to the Herodian temple, where a series of inscribed balustrades and curtains created barriers on the way from the precincts to the Temple’s innermost chamber. The entrance to the inner areas was limited, respectively, to the ritually pure people; gentiles and Jews; men and women; laypeople, priests, and the Hight Priest.[[101]](#footnote-101) Branham inferred that in synagogues, the chancel screens divided between the sacred liturgical space and holiest area of the Torah; in both synagogues and churches, the fenced holy areas evocated the memory of the destroyed Temple.[[102]](#footnote-102)

Fine disassociated the synagogue “chancel screens” from the sacred geography of the Temple and their Temple-related semantics in ecclesiastic spaces. His counterargument relied on a visionary description of pious women standing “by reed mats made as a partition for the bimah” to listen to the Torah wisdom at God’s heavenly study house. He proposed that an anonymous ancient author of that messianic text projected a practice of bimah screens separating between women and a homilist or exegete in late-fifth or sixth-century synagogues and study houses on the word to come.[[103]](#footnote-103)

## Sacred Direction

The research of the sacred direction in synagogues dealt with a greater scope of the Jewish sacred geography: the sacred direction was deemed a vector indicating the position of any worshipper relative to the solemn destination of his or her devotion and prayer. Franz Landsberger (1883–1964) was the first to delineate a meandering evolution of concurrent approaches to the sacred direction in synagogues in relation to biblical and historical sources and in comparison to pagan temples and churches. [[104]](#footnote-104) In the ancient synagogues, either portals or Torah arks (near the portal or at other wall) indicated the sacred direction.[[105]](#footnote-105) These markers pointed at the *omphalos mundi* (Jerusalem or, narrower, the Temple and its Holy of the Holies); copied the orientation of Temple in Jerusalem; were aligned to the heavenly target (towards the sunrise); or addressed divine presence (*Shekinah*; at the Temple’s site or elsewhere).[[106]](#footnote-106) The fixed receptacle for the Torah scrolls at (or in) the wall facing Jerusalem and the Temple – in Levine’s opinion, “a sentiment that flowed primarily from internal ethnic and historical considerations”[[107]](#footnote-107) – became the standard in the post-ancient synagogues. Landsberger remarked that the early modern Ashkenazi ritual art identified the direction to Jerusalem (in fact, southward or east-southward) with the east and rising sun.[[108]](#footnote-108)

## Heaven on Earth

The last subchapter of my survey is about the contributions addressing the issues of synagogue sanctity drawn on the visions of heavenly architecture. With its predecessors in ancient civilizations and parallels in Christian thought, the Jewish tradition deemed the relations of mundane sanctuaries and divine astronomy as reciprocal. On the one hand, Jewish mystical *Merkavah* (God’s Chariot) and *Hekhalot* (Palaces) literature described the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant as a microcosm and celestial Paradise.[[109]](#footnote-109) On the other hand, the heaven was represented in these texts as a complex of courts, palaces, and sanctuaries inhabited by angels and God.[[110]](#footnote-110)

Researchers of ancient and synagogue architecture occasionally resorted to the topoi of cosmic models and heavenly counterparts of mundane sanctuaries. Particular discussion revolved about the depiction of Helios and the Zodiac cycle on ancient synagogue floors. Gideon Foerster has associated these astronomic images with the cosmological symbolism of the Jerusalem Temple.[[111]](#footnote-111) Branham interprets the mosaic floor in the Bet Alpha synagogue as a cosmic stratification comprising the empyrean, earthly heavens, and human realm.[[112]](#footnote-112) In Jodi Magnes’s mind, the Zodiac signs surrounding Helios alluded to the mystical meeting of heaven and earth and access through twelve celestial gates to the divine chariot-throne.[[113]](#footnote-113)

Fine discussed ancient synagogue chancel screens in the context of literature representing the heavenly houses of prayer and Torah studies as both an ideal sample for mundane synagogues and posthumous destination for the righteous souls.[[114]](#footnote-114) I proposed that the vision of a sacred architecture as a representation of the paradisiacal garden inspired many vegetative ornaments in ancient to early modern synagogues.[[115]](#footnote-115)

# Conclusion

The phenomenon of artistic and architectural expressions of sanctity in Jewish sacred spaces has challenged a spectrum of humanitarian sciences that investigate pre-modern Jewish cultures. Although such variegated studies may barely attain synergy of a consolidated discipline, they benefit from multiplicity of angles and open-ended horizons, and impel daring theoretical paradigms.

1. See Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 2001); Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000), 169–73; Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue During the Greco-Roman Period* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 25–33; on the earlier publications in this field, see Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogue in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 205–26; Joseph Gutmann, “The Origin of the Synagogue: The Current State of Research,” in *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology and Architecture*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (New York: Ktav, 1975), 36–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Chapter 1.2: “Synagogue Architecture in Late Antiquity (Second to Sixth Century)” and Section 2: “The Medieval and Early Modern Synagogue” in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1912); Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewendt und Granier, 1917); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959). See also Matthew T. Evans, “The Sacred: Differentiating, Clarifying and Extending Concepts,” *Review of Religious Research* 45, 1 (2003): 32–47; Bryan S. Rennie, “Mircea Eliade and the Perception of the Sacred in the Profane: Intention, Reduction, and Cognitive Theory,” *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 43, 1 (2007): 73–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. General overview: Theodore Friedman, Baruch A. Levine, and Eliezer Schweid, “Kedushah” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 50–56 and the included bibliography. Ancient perceptions: Yehezkel Kaufman, *Toledot ha-emunah ha-yisre’elit* 2 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1937), 749 s. v. *kedushah* (Hebrew). See also Jack N. Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred: Mediation of the Divine Among Jews in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Note that a hierarchic rather than strictly binary approach to the sacred characterized Gerardus van der Leeuw’s first publication of his *Wegen en grenzen: studie over de verhouding van religie en kunst* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1932) and its amended German translation, *Vom Heiligen in der Kunst*, trans. Annelotte Piper (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1957). The addition to the term “profane” to sharpen the dichotomy in the title of English edition of van der Leeuw’s *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (see above, n. 31) was probably inspired by Eliade, who supplied it with his introduction. On the various dimensions of the sacred within the same religion, see, for example, *Loci Sacri: Understanding Sacred Places*, eds. Thomas Coomans, Herman De Dijn, Jan De Maeyer, Rajesh Heynickx, and Bart Verschaffel (Louvain: Louvain University Press, 2012); and on this variety in Judaism, see Haviva Pedaya, “The Divinity as Place and Time and the Holy Place in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Sacred Space: Shrine, City, Land*, 84–111. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mircea Eliade, *Traité d’histoire des religions: Morphologie du sacré* (Paris: Payot, 1953), 16–17; idem, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), 11–13. We are also attentive to the voices departing from several of Eliade’s implications, see Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 119–212. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 12, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 521–45; *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, eds. Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner (Leiden: Brill, 2001), no. 8268: קדש. See also Joan R. Branham, “Vicarious Sacrality: Temple Space in Ancient Synagogues” in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery* 2, eds. Dan Urman and Paul V. M. Flesher (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 326. We thank Dr. Tania Notarius for her kind advice on this issue.  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Douglas A. Marshall, “Temptation, Tradition, and Taboo: A Theory of Sacralization,” *Sociological Theory* 28, 1 (2010): 64–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On this predicament, see David Henige, *Historical Evidence and Argument* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 42–57. See also Jaś Elsner statement that archaeology can offer inferences rather than provide empirical observations of rituals in his “Material Culture and Ritual: State of the Question,” in *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*, eds. Bonna D. Wescoat and Robert G. Ousterhout (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the spectrum of methodologies of studying the image-and-text interrelations in the Greco-Roman culture, see Rina Talgam, *The Magdala Stone: Emerging Liturgical Space in the Early Synagogue and Church*, Chapter 4: Description and Iconography (forthcoming). I thank the author who kindly provided me with an advanced draft of her manuscript. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Lee I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2013), 354–55 (Inscriptions); Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World*, 222–25; Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue*, 171–74; Anders Runesson, Donald D. Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 10 and [328]; Fine, *This Holy Place*, 25–33; Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogue in the Second* Temple Period (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 122–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Martin Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World* (Leiden: Brill. 2007), 219–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Lee I. Levine, “Synagogue Sanctity” in idem, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2013), 354–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. E.g., idem, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000), 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World*, 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Idem, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity*, 337–54. Here Levine classified “religious art” the into “Jewish symbols,” meaning the objects and plants mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (the menorah, often accompanied by shofar, lulav, etrog, and incense shovel) and other “Biblical depictions” comprising “figures” and “scenes.” This discussion excluded the Greco-Roman and Persian images found in synagogues. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Branham, “Vicarious Sacrality,” 325–29; Martin Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World* (Leiden: Brill. 2007), 219–20; Ze’ev Safrai, “From the Synagogue to ‘Little Temple’,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 10: B, 2 (1989, 23–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World*, 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000), 169–73; Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World*, 2–6, Fine, *This Holy Place*, 25–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 81 and the discussion at 79–94. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 49–59. See also Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 193–206; idem, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity*, 338, 412–13. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Talgam, *The Magdala Stone*, passim; Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Arfan Najar, “Magdala: Preliminary Report,” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot: Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 125 (2013), www.hadashot-esi.org.il (accessed February 20, 2020). On more publications and other similar decorated stone blocks from the late Second Temple period and the first centuries C.E., see Talgam, *The Magdala Stone*; Zeev Weiss, “The ‘Magdala Stone Table’: Its Function and Role in Determining the Liturgical Furniture in The Ancient Synagogue,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 34, 2 (2021): 610–612 (The Magdala stone: Current State of Research), 617–24 (Evidence of Other Stone Tables: Review of the Archaeological Finds). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Zeev Weiss, “The Synagogue in the Age of Transition, from the Second Temple to Roman Times: Recent Developments in Research,” Lutz Doering, “The Synagogue of Magdala: Between Localized Practice and Reference to the Temple,” and Judith H. Newman, “Contextualizing the Magdala Synagogue Stone in Its Place: An Exercise in Liturgical Imagination” in *Synagogues in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods Archaeological Finds: New Methods, New Theories*, eds. Lutz Doering and Andrew R. Krause (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2020), 33–38, 127–53, 155–73 (respectively). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. E. g., Rachel Hachlili, “The Migdal Stone and its Ornamentation,” *Revue Biblique* 124, 2 (2017): 245–72; Steven Fine, “The Magdala Ashlar: From Synagogue Furnishing to Media Event,” *Ars Judaica* 13 (2017): 27–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World*, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 24; 95–96, 206; idem, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity*, 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Branham, “Vicarious Sacrality,” 322; eadem, “Sacred Space under Erasure in Ancient Synagogues and Early Churches,” *The Art Bulletin* 74, 3 (1992): 375–94. See also eadem, “Sacred Space in Ancient Jewish and Early Medieval Christian Architecture” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993), 104–28, 187–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Branham, “Sacred Space under Erasure,” 392, refers to Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967), 89; and Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l'être: Hors-texte* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 72–73. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Gary A. Rendsburg, “Sacred Space in Judaism after the Temple,” in *Sacred Space, Sacred Thread: Perspectives Across Time and Traditions*, eds. John W. Welch and Jacob Rennaker (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 15–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Michel Foucault, “Des espaces autres,” *L’Architettura* 13 (1968): 822–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Rendsburg, “Sacred Space in Judaism after the Temple,” 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. On constructing the Temple’s sacred space through ritual, see Naftali S. Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 73–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The relation of the post-Temple to Temple liturgy was widely debated. Ezra Fleischer considered that after the Temple’s destruction, Jewish liturgy abruptly discontinued the old rite, see his “The Beginnings of Obligatory Jewish Prayer,” *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 397–441 [Hebrew]. Others maintained the theory of a gradual evolution; for example, see Esther G. Chazon, “Liturgy Before and After the Temple’s Destruction: Change or Continuity?” in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History?* eds. Daniel R. Schwartz and Zeev Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 371–92; Eyal Regev, “Temple Prayer as the Origin of the Fixed Prayer: On the Evolution of Prayer during the Period of the Second Temple,” *Zion* 70, 1 (2005): 1–25 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 526–27. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 526–27. See also Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World*, 223; Branham, “Vicarious Sacrality,” 325–26; eadem, “Sacred Space under Erasure,” 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Susan Haber, *“They Shall Purify Themselves:” Essays on Purity in Early Judaism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2008), 163–64, 172–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Here is a selection of these contributions: Michael D. Swartz, “The Topography of Blood in Mishnah Yoma,” in *Jewish Blood: Metaphor and Reality in Jewish History, Culture, and Religion*, ed. Mitchell B. Hart; London; Routledge, 2009), 70–82; Haber, *“They Shall Purify Themselves,”* 9–71, 161–79; Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 123–219; Jacob Neusner, “Map Without Territory: Mishnah’s System of Sacrifice and Sanctuary,” *History of Religions* 19, 2 (1979): 103–27; Naftali Goldstein, “Sacrifice and Worship of God in Rabbinic Thought after the Destruction of the Temple,” *Daat* 8 (1982): 29–51 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Michael D. Swartz, “Liturgy, Poetry, and the Persistence of Sacrifice,” in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History?* 393–412 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 240, 302–305, 344; Fine, *This Holy Place*, 10–23, 32, 48, 62, 83; Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred*, 85; Branham, “Vicarious Sacrality,” 336; eadem, “Sacred Space under Erasure,” 392; Rendsburg, “Sacred Space in Judaism after the Temple,” 19; David Amit and Yonatan Adler, “The Observance of Ritual Purity after 70 C.E. A Reevaluation of the Evidence in Light of Recent Archaeological Discoveries” and Jodi Magness, “Priests and Purity in the Dura-Europos Synagogue” in *Follow the Wise: Studies in Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Lee I. Levine*, eds. Seth Schwartz, Jodi Magness, Oded Irshai, and Zeev Weiss (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010), 121–44, 421–34 (respectively); Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta,” in *Daughters of the King*, eds. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 103–15.

On ritual purity, see Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cf. Marshall’s theory of the religious taboo as a sacralization agent resolving the tension between individual temptations and collective tradition in his “Temptation, Tradition, and Taboo,” 64–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Mishnah, *Middot* 2:5; Tosefta, *Sukkah* 4:1, see: Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 504–505 and more rabbinical sources and scholarly publications in 504 n. 32. See also Chad Spigel, “Reconsidering the Question of Separate Seating in Ancient Synagogues,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 58, 1 (2012): 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 502–505; Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 103; Shmuel Safrai, “Was There a Women’s Gallery in the Synagogues of Antiquity?” *Tarbiz* 22 (1963): 333–34 [Hebrew]. See also earlier: Richard Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche Synagogen* (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt, 1927), 54; Leopold Löw, “Der synagogale Ritus,” *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 33 (1884): 364–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Spigel, “Reconsidering the Question of Separate Seating in Ancient Synagogues,” 62–83. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Steven Fine, “Furnishing God’s Study House: An Exercise in Rabbinic Imagination,” in idem, *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 139–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ismar Elbogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Frankfurt am Main: Olms, 1931), 466–68; see also Richard Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche Synagogen* (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt, 1927), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Simon Paulus, *Die Architektur der Synagoge im Mittelalter: Überlieferung und Bestand* (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2007), 509–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964), 51; Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1898), 25–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Katrin Keßler, “The Jewish Ritual Bath in Germany: Evolution and Statistics,” in *Jewish Architecture: New Sources and Approaches*, eds. Katrin Kessler and Alexander von Kienlin (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2015), 52–63; *Mikwe: Geschichte und Architektur jüdischer Ritualbäder in Deutschland*, ed. Georg Heuberger (Frankfurt: Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Frankfurt am Main, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Elisheva Baumgarten, *Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz: Men, Women, and Everyday Religious Observance* (Philadelphia, 2014), 21–50 (“Standing Before God: Purity and Impurity in the Synagogue”). Cf. also Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta,” in *Daughters of the King*, eds. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 103–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Jeffrey Woolf, *The Fabric of Religious Life in Medieval Ashkenaz (1000–1300): Creating Sacred Communities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 21, see also 89–95, 136, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Vladimir Levin, “The Architecture of Gender: Women in the Eastern European Synagogue,” *Jewish History* 35 (2021): 89–134; Moshe Rosman, “Ashkenazic Women’s Participation in Public Worship: Four Hundred Years Moving Toward the Center,” in *Ushmu’el Beqore’e Shemo: Shmuel (Samuel) Leiter Memorial Volume*, ed. Shamma Friedman et al. (Jerusalem, The Bialik Institute, 2016), 248–49; Moshe Rosman, “The History of Jewish Women in Early Modern Poland: An Assessment,” *Polin* 18 (2007): 46–50; Paulus, *Die Architektur der Synagoge im Mittelalter*, 509–11; Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe: Architecture, History, Meaning* (New York: Architectural History Foundation and MIT Press, 1985), 28–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Richard Krautheimer, “Introduction to an ‘Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture’,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942), 1–33; and Catherine Carver McCurrach, “‘Renovatio’ Reconsidered: Richard Krautheimer and the Iconography of Architecture,” *Gesta* 50, 1 (2011): 41–69. See also *Sacred Scripture – Sacred Space: The Interlacing of Real Places and Conceptual Spaces in Medieval Art and Architecture*, eds. Tobias Frese, Wilfried E. Keil and Kristina Krüger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. See Michel Foucault, “Des espaces autres: Hétérotopies,” in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954–1988* 4 (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994): 752–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Constructing a Small Place,” in *Sacred Space: Shrine, City, Land*, eds. Benjamin Z. Kedar and Raphael J. Zwi Werblowsky (Jerusalem and London: Macmillan and Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1998), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Rendsburg, “Sacred Space in Judaism after the Temple,” 31–36. Rendsburg believed that the triple gate leading to the Herodian Temple’s courts could serve an additional model for synagogue façades. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Joan R. Branham, “Penetrating the Sacred: Breaches and Barriers in the Jerusalem Temple,” in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. Sharon E. J. Gerstel (Dumbarton Oaks: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6–24; Branham, “Sacred Space under Erasure.” [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Annette Weber, “Neue Monumente für das mittelalterliche Aschkenas? Zur Sakraltypologie der Ritualbauten in den SchUM-Gemeinden,” in *Die SchUM-Gemeinden Speyer, Worms, Mainz: auf dem Weg zum Welterbe*, eds. Pia Heberer and Ursula Reuter (Regensburg: Schnell and Steiner, 2013), 37–62; Ilia Rodov, “Revisiting the ‘Blind Synagogue’: Vision and Voice in Double-Nave Prayer Halls” in *Jewish Architecture in Europe: New Sources and Approaches*, eds. Katrin Keßler and Alexander von Kienlin (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2015), 83–94. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue*, 45–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Jeffrey Woolf, *The Fabric of Religious Life in Medieval Ashkenaz (1000–1300): Creating Sacred Communities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 129–30; and idem, The Synagogue Torah Ark as a “Lesser Temple” Within in a “Lesser Temple,” in *Enshrining the Sacred: Microarchitecture in Ritual Spaces*, ed. Ilia Rodov (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Smith, “Constructing a Small Place,” 21–23. Cf. also Hans Sedlmayr, Die Entstehung der Kathedrale (Zurich: Atlantis, 1950), 81–83, 430; Steven Millhauser, “The Fascination of the Miniature,” *Grand Street* 2, 4 (1983): 128–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 23–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. For example, cf. Yosef Garfinkel and Madeleine Mumcuoglu, *Solomon’s Temple and Palace: New Archaeological Discoveries* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2015), 37–60, 102–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Talgam, *The Magdala Stone*, passim; and publications based on Rina Talgam’s proposed concept: Mordechai Aviam, “The Decorated Stone from the Synagogue at Migdal: A Holistic Interpretation and a Glimpse into the Life of Galilean Jews at the Time of Jesus,” *Novum Testamentum* 55 (2013): 205–20; idem, ”The Book of Enoch and the Galilean Archaeology and Landscapes,” in *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, eds. James H. Charlesworth and Darell L. Bock (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 159–69; Mordechai Aviam, “Reverence for Jerusalem and for the Temple in Galilean Society,” *Jesus and the Temple: Textual and Archaeological Exploration*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 123–44.

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72. See Rachel Hachlili, “The Migdal Stone and its Ornamentation,” *Revue Biblique* 124, no. 2 (2017): 245–72; Steven Fine, “The Magdala Ashlar: From Synagogue Furnishing to Media Event,” *Ars Judaica* 13 (2017): 27–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Here is a selection of their publications: *Natural Materials of the Holy Land and the Visual Translation of Place, 500–1500*, eds. Bartal, Renana, Neta Bodner, and Bianca Kühnel (London: Routledge 2017); *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, eds. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (London: Routledge, 2016); Yamit Rachman-Schrire, “Sinai Stones on Mount Zion: Mary’s Pilgrimage in Jerusalem” and Neta B. Bodner, “Earth from Jerusalem in the Pisan Camposanto,” in *Between Jerusalem and Europe*, eds. Renana Bartal and Hanna Vorholt (Leiden, Brill, 2015), 57–73 and 74–93 (respectively); *Perspektiven der Spolienforschung*, eds. Stefan Altekamp, Carmen Marcks-Jacobs, and Peter Seiler: 1. *Spoliierung und Transposition* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 2. *Zentren und Konjunkturen der Spoliierung* (Berlin: Topoi, 2017); Robert Ousterhout, “Architecture as Relic and the Construction of Sanctity: The Stones of the Holy Sepulchre,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 62, 1 (2003): 4–23; Jaś Elsner, “From the Culture of Spolia to the Cult of Relics: The Arch of Constantine and the Genesis of Late Antique Forms,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 68 (2000): 149–84; Beat Brenk, “Spolia from Constantine to Charlemagne: Aesthetics versus Ideology,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), 103–109. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Raʻanan S. Boustan, “The Dislocation of the Temple Vessels: Mobile Sanctity and Rabbinic Rhetorics of Space,” in *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition*, eds. Raʻanan S. Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 135–46. See also Steven Fine, *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 64–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. See Steven Fine, *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2016), esp. 263–207; Raʿanan S. Boustan, “The Spoils of the Jerusalem Temple at Rome and Constantinople: Jewish Conter-geography in a Christianizing Empire,” in *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World*, eds. Gregg Gardner and Kevin Osterloh (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 327–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. John B. Ward-Perkins, “The Shrine of St Peter's and its Twelve Spiral Columns,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 42 (1952): 21–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. *Igeret ha-rav Sherira Ga’on*, ed. Benjamin Manasseh Lewin (Haifa: s. n., 1921), 72–73 (Hebrew); Joseph Gutmann, “Sherira Gaon and the Babylonian Origin of the Synagogue,” in *Occident and Orient: A Tribute to the Memory of Alexander Scheiber*, ed. Robert Dan (Budapest and Leiden: Akadémiai Kiadó and Brill, 1988), 209. See also Branham, “Vicarious Sacrality,” 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. E.g., Tunisian Jews believed that when the most part of Israelites were exiled to Babylon, a group of priestly exiles from Jerusalem took a door and stones of the Solomonic Temple and incorporated them in the Ghriba synagogue in Djerba. See Abraham L. Udovitch and Lucette Valensi, *The Last Arab Jews: The Communities of Jerba, Tunisia* (London: Routledge, 2016), 8. Jews of Prague narrated that stones from the Second Temple in Jerusalem laid in the foundations of the Altneuschul, see Sergey R. Kravtsov, “Preserving a Synagogue: Cultural, Material, and Sacred Values,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 33, 1 (2021): 222. I thank Dr. Kravtzov who discussed with me this and many other issues relating to synagogue sanctity. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Vered Tohar, “Sacred Stones: Literary and Folkloric Representations of the Remains of the Holy Temple,” in *Jerusalem and Other Holy Places as Foci of Multireligious and Ideological Confrontation* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 339–54. The motif of return of the synagogues and houses of learning in Babylon to the Land of Israel is traced back to the Babylonian Talmud, *Megilah* 29a.

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80. Uri Ehrlich, *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach to Jewish Liturgy* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 237–46. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Swartz, “Liturgy, Poetry, and the Persistence of Sacrifice,” 408–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid., 239. Cf. also idem, “When You Pray Know Before Whom You Are Standing,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49, 1 (1998): 48–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Joseph Sievers, “‘Where Two or Three …, Shekhinah and Matthew 18:20: Foundations for Jewish-Christian Dialogue and Beyond?" *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 6, 1 (2017): 24–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. “Wherever ten persons assemble in a synagogue, God’s presence is with them” (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 6a and several parallels), quoted and discussed in Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 198, see also 246 n. 114, 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 134–37. Cf. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 477. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Branham, “Vicarious Sacrality,” 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 76; Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ilia Rodov, “Microarchitecture and Supernatural: An Introductory Survey – Manifestations of Sacredness” in *Enshrining the Sacred: Microarchitecture in Ritual Spaces*, ed. Ilia Rodov (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming); idem, “Hallucination Depicted: God’s Name on Shiviti Plates” in *Sanctifying Texts, Transforming Rituals: Encounters with Religion and Culture*, eds. Paul van Geest, Marcel Poorthuis, Els Rose (Leuven, Peeters: 2017), 238–74; Ilia Rodov, “Capturing the Ineffable: The Tetragrammaton in Synagogue Art of Romanian Moldavia,” in: *The Paths of Daniel: Studies in Judaism and Jewish Culture in Honor of Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber*, ed. Adam S. Ferziger (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2017), 191\*–213\*; Ilia Rodov, “Winged Image of the Divine: A Comparative Note on Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish Art in Early Modern Ukraine,” *Judaica Ukrainica* 3 (2014), 105–127; idem, “Imagining Theophany in Romania: Synagogue Painting and Christian Orthodox Art,” *Apulum*, 51 (2014), 49–66; idem, *The Torah Ark in Renaissance Poland: A Jewish Revival of Classical Antiquity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 180–81. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid., 166–67; idem, “Imagining Theophany.” [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Fine, *This Holy Place*. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Haber, *“They Shall Purify Themselves,”* 177–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World*, 69–77, 220–21; Karel van der Toorn, “The Iconic Book Analogies between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. idem (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 229–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 36. See also above, note 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 36–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid., 149–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Cf. Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred*, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Rodov, *The Torah Ark in Renaissance Poland*, 166–67; idem, [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid., 145. See also Carl Hermann Kraeling et al., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Final Report* 8, 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 36–37; Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred*, 84. See also Julian Obermann, “The Sepulchre of the Maccabean Martyrs,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50, 4 (1931): 250–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 38–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Joan R. Branham, “Penetrating the Sacred: Breaches and Barriers in the Jerusalem Temple,” in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. Sharon E. J. Gerstel (Dumbarton Oaks: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6–24; Branham, “Sacred Space under Erasure.” [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Ibid.; eadem, “Vicarious Sacrality.” [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Fine, *Art, History and the Historiography*, 139–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Franz Landsberger, “The Sacred Direction in Synagogue and Church,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 28 (1957): 181–203. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Cf. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Idem, 326–28; Landsberger, “The Sacred Direction.” [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 326–28; idem, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity*, 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Landsberger, “The Sacred Direction,” 203. See also Ilia Rodov, “‘With Eyes towards Zion’: Visions of the Holy Land in Romanian Synagogues,” *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 6 (2013), 138–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Rachel Elior, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: The Littman library of Jewish Civilization, 2014), 128–29, 245–49.

On the cosmological interpretations of the Ark and Sanctuary in art, see Shulamit Laderman, *Images of Cosmology in Jewish and Byzantine Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Elisabeth Revel-Neher, *Le signe de la rencontre: L’arche d’alliance dans l’art juif et chretien du second au dixieme siecles* (Paris: Association des amis des études archéologiques byzantino-slaves et du christianisme oriental, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. These recent selected publications discuss sources and offer more bibliography: ibid., 21 n. 43, 63–81, 232–65; Lawrence H. Schiffman, *The Courtyards of the House of the Lord: Studies on the Temple Scroll* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Raʻanan S. Boustan and Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Introduction: ‘In Heaven as It Is on Earth’” and Raʻanan S. Boustan, “Angels in Architecture: Temple Art and the Poetics of Praise in the Song of the Sabbath Sacrifice,” in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, eds. Raʻanan S. Boustan and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–15 and 195–212 (respectively). [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Gideon Foerster, “The Zodiac in Ancient Synagogues and Its Place in Jewish Thought and Literature,” *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* 19 (1987): 227 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Branham, “Vicarious Sacrality,” 341–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Jodi Magness, “Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 59 (2005): 1–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Fine, *Art, History and the Historiography*, 139–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Ilia Rodov, “The Marvelous Garden: On the Poetics of Vegetal Ornamentation in European Synagogues and Its Origins,” in *Timorah: Articles on Jewish Art* (Ramat Gan, Bar Ilan University, 2006), 111–32 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-115)