

December 18, 1969

Mr. I. J. Kagan
Executive Director
The Federation Chronicle
24 Raleigh Street
Yeoville, Johannesburg
South Africa

Dear Mr. Kagan:

In accordance with the request contained in your letter of 10th December, enclosed herewith please find an article by Rabbi Lamm to be included in the February Issue of the Federation Chronicle.

With kind regards, I am

Sincerely yours,

Edith Kolko
Sec'y to Rabbi Lamm

ek/
encl.

THE FEDERATION CHRONICLE

(MEMBER OF AUDIT BUREAU OF CIRCULATION)

TELEPHONES 43-2161/2
P.O. Box 6524, JOHANNESBURG

24, RALEIGH STREET
YEOVILLE, JOHANNESBURG

10th December, 1969.

Rabbi Norman Lamm,
The Jewish Centre,
131, West 86th Street,
NEW YORK 10024,
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Dear Rabbi Lamm,

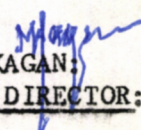
The Fifth Biennial National Conference of the Federation of Synagogues of South Africa will be held in Johannesburg from the 12th March to the 15th March, 1970. To mark the occasion, the February Issue of the Federation Chronicle will be devoted to the Conference.

I should be grateful if you would let me have an article dealing with some problem which in your view should be dealt with by the Conference, or with some topical subject of contemporary Jewish interest.

As we are going to press by the 15th February, I should be grateful if your article would reach me by not later than the 7th February next.

With kindest regards,

Yours sincerely,


I. J. KAGAN:
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

IJK/HS.

"THE ROLE OF THE SYNAGOGUE TODAY"

There are three conceptions of the function of a temple or a synagogue.

The first is the common-sensical understanding, one ~~what~~ is most appealing to most of us in our social and cultural context. That is, that the synagogue is the source and origin of kedushah (sanctity) in the community. It is the provenance of spiritual values which radiate from the synagogue outwards. The synagogue, according to this understanding, is the well-spring of religious teaching for the entire community.

The second conception is the classical Jewish view. It maintains that the synagogue must not be the cause or source of holiness, but the effect and the result of the kedushah of all the people.

The RaMBaⁿ points to this idea as the reason for the portion of Terumah, with its commandment to build the mishkan, coming after the portions of Yitro and Mishpatim, which speak of the revelation of Torah and the system of laws and social justice which together qualified Israel as a "holy nation." It was only after we had already attained this level of holiness, through law and justice, that it became relevant to speak of a Tabernacle which would focalize the preexistent holiness within the community and allow man to confront the Presence of God in a sustained and regular manner. Only through the study of

T^urah and the practice of mitzvot do we become a holy nation, and only then does a Sanctuary become relevant.

A temple or a synagogue, then, is not the cause of holiness but its effect, not its origin but its result. Therefore, a synagogue whose members do not observe the laws of Torah, or which is built by people whose money was acquired in violation of the principles of justice, is truly invalid; it is a sacrilege.

T_his interpretation of the role of the temple in Jewish life is even older than RaMBaM and the Middle Ages. In antiquity already, the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed: "Thus sayeth the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: mend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Do not trust in the lying words, saying: hekhal Hashem... the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord hemah, are these" (Jeremiah 7:3,4). The prophet is mimicking his deluded people who believe that it is unnecessary to observe any laws, it is a matter of indifference whether our conduct is moral or immoral, because all that counts is "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord." In their fixation on the Temple cult and their disregard of personal conduct, the people are guilty of repeating this empty litany, "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord," and hypnotizing themselves into an official religious amorality.

But what is the meaning of that last word, hemah, (translated as "are these," but which literally means "in them")? R. Eliezer Ashkenazi explained as follows: The prophet mimicked the people in the first two expressions, "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord." The third time he repeats these words, he is presenting his solution, his prophetic answer: Instead of this endless invocation of "the Temple of the Lord," as if it were some magical incantation, you must understand that the real Temple of the Lord, the true hekhhal Hashem, is: hemah, in them, in you, in your hearts, in your attitudes. The authentic "Temple of the Lord" possesses sanctity only because it is brought there by the worshippers, and it is therefore conditioned on your piety and morality, on your character and your decency, on your deeds and on your deportment. A "Temple of the Lord" is not a structure of wood and brick and mortar and aluminum and glass. It is a House of Holiness that is built out of the collective good deeds of the worshippers, the cumulative piety and generosity and nobility of those who minister within it.

According to this classical conception, the synagogue is not an oven which gives heat and power to the religious functioning of all else; but a thermometer, which gives a clear index and measure of the spiritual health and warmth of the entire community.

Such was the synagogue of European Jewry, East and West. The Synagogue was not expected to be a cause and supplier of

kedushah, the religious dynamism of the kehilah, but an indicator of how well the community was doing spiritually. That is why the European Jewish community understood and instinctively assented to the halakhah that a House of Study is greater than a House of Prayer, that the yeshivah where Torah is studied possesses a higher degree of sanctity and significance than the synagogue, where prayers are offered. That is why they understood and assented to the halakhah that even a mikvah is more important than a synagogue and, if need be, the Sefer Torah must be sold in order to provide funds to build a mikvah.

But there is also a third conception of the role of the synagogue, one that is arrived at not theologically but through experience; one that is not even acknowledged as such, but exists in fact. In our days, the Jewish community^{ies} of many Western countries have largely realized the idea of a synagogue that is neither the cause nor the effect of holiness, but a substitute for it, that which replaces all other religious values.

We have made the fatal error of accepting the temple as the end-all of Jewish existence. We have replaced the cult within the temple to the cult of the temple. Like the primitives whom Jeremiah castigated, our modern Jew ignores the totality of Judaism, and satisfies his spiritual yearnings by raising his eyes heavenward and piously but emptily proclaiming: "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord." Thus, masses of

American Jews primitively speak of "going to Temple" or "giving to Temple" or a "dance at Temple" as if this defined the comprehensive sweep of all of Judaism -- and whoever dissents is a "fanatic." Sophisticated contemporary Jews behave naively, as if they are erecting temples as our human contribution for God's welfare, providing a house for a homeless and dispossessed Deity. They conveniently forget that when they contribute towards a temple they are doing God no favor; on the contrary: ve'ykkchu li terumah, they are not giving but taking when they erect or support a synagogue. For a synagogue is God's gracious gift granted to men who first must earn it, spiritually and ethically.

Of course, once the temple has displaced all else -- the study of Torah, Shabbat, kashrut, Family Purity -- the next step is its own inevitable displacement and disappearance. In most Jewish communities throughout the United States today, the temple as a substitute has suffered massive trivialization. It has been secularized into just one tiny component of an empty Jewish community. On the list of priorities of most Jewish communities, the synagogue or temple takes its rightful place only after the Jewish Country Club (built because the Gentile country club permits no Jews), the "M" or the Center, the Old Age Home, B'nai Brith, and Hadassah -- and even then, when the Temple is finally acknowledged, the sisterhood and the

men's club and the young couples' club and the teenagers and the bowling league... all come before worship and prayers!

8 Is it any wonder that so many thoughtful young Jews refuse to be bored by the sanctified hypocrisies of their elders and reject their "religion" together with their temples?

Interestingly, we find the following paradox: both ends of the spectrum meet. The classical conception of the synagogue as the effect and result of the community's religious dynamism converges with the modernist Jewish conception of the temple as substitute; for, in effect, this third interpretation of the role of the temple does present us with a synagogue that is truly a measure of the kedushah in the community -- and the thermometer registers near absolute zero. The emptiness of the temple reflects the almost total absence of sanctity in the community at large. If the modern temple is a shrine of vacuity, it is because the religious spirit has gone out of the community, because true religious inspiration no longer quickens in the hearts of the worshippers, because genuine commitment has been paralyzed and withered.

What then remains for us to do? Obviously, we can never consent to the synagogue as a substitute, for this is a grotesque distortion of all of Judaism. Nor can we, in the context of contemporary sociological realities, expect to realize the ideal of the synagogue as the effect and the result of the community,

as the thermometer of sanctity. That was possible for the RaMBaN, it was possible in ancient Israel, it was possible in Europe or even today in the State of Israel, and in a few scattered communities throughout the Western world. But by and large, the sociological facts preclude this ideal form from being actualized in our country. We have no kehillah or other cohesive social-communal structure. Everything revolves about the synagogue. If the synagogue is going to be the effect and the measure of religious life throughout the community, it is going to reveal -- nothing, emptiness, profaneness.

Hence, if we will not permit the synagogue to become a substitute, and if the realities will not permit the ideal of synagogue as an effect, we must out of lack of suitable alternatives, recognize the role of the synagogue as the source and cause of the religious life of the community.

Our modern Orthodox synagogues must be based upon that recognition of the role of the synagogue as the center of Jewish communal life, as the source that generates T^urah education and Sabbath observance, kashrut and charity and good deeds, throughout the community of its adherents. If there is going to be any kedushah in the community, its provenance will likely as not be the synagogue.

That is why it should be obvious that the synagogue can not and must not and dare not reflect the Sabbath observance of its members; it must present a level ~~■~~ which is much higher, and

inspire them to attain that level. It must be the source and not the effect, the origin and not the measure of community Sabbath observance.

For the same reason the synagogue must not and cannot and care not represent the ethical level of its worshippers; it must preach a finer and nobler level of morality. It must be able to reproach the man who exploits the laborer or the customer or the client, and it must hold up the Jewish model of modesty in dress or deed or speech for all its people, and obstinately and forthrightly reject the contention that the kind of immodesty which is acceptable outside a synagogue is acceptable within its sacred precincts.

The Synagogue as generator of religion and kedushah must therefore concentrate on three main areas.

The first of these is the study of Torah -- not just support but study, and not just for children but for adults, because the study of Torah is not a purely pediatric activity. After all, the real identifying mark of Orthodoxy is not "glatt kosher," and not the mechitzah, but the study of Torah. The Orthodox synagogue is a schul -- a school. Only through genuine study of Torah will we be able to realize when we have failed morally. When the synagogue is the source of the teaching of Torah, it will be able to bring its members back to a higher moral standard.

When the Temple was located in Shiloh, before it came to Jerusalem in the days of David, the High Priest was Eli. The Bible (I Samuel 2) tells us that the children of Eli were corrupt; they committed crude deeds of immorality within the very walls of the Temple. Their ignominious conduct was a scandal, a disgrace. And so there appeared a prophet, whom the Bible calls mysteriously and anonymously "a man of God," and he prophesied that the High Priesthood would be taken away from the family of Eli, and that, furthermore, his descendants for generations to come will die young. Some 1500 years later, the Talmud (R.H. 18a) tells us that there was a family in Jerusalem whose members generally died at the age of 18. They came to the great R. Yohanan b. Zakkai and pleaded with him for his assistance. He said to them: Probably you are from the family of Eli, which was cursed as punishment for their ancient immorality. What shall we do?, they asked him. His answer was: never mind business, or agriculture, or trades; go rather and spend your time in the study of Torah, and you will live. They did so, and they achieved longevity -- for which the family thereafter adopted the surname, "the family of R. Yohanan."

When moral deficiencies and corruption actually penetrate the temple itself, the way to overcome them is by remaking the temple or synagogue into a schul, the source of the study of Torah, healing the breach and purifying the impurity. If the moral and religious level of the community is disgracefully low,

the synagogue must not reflect it, but must rectify it by talmud Torah, teaching the Jew how to conduct himself.

The second function of the synagogue must be tzedakah -- in both its senses, as charity and as justice, tzeddek. It must encourage people to give generously and openly to every good cause, Jewish or general. And it must always act as a goad, reminding people that exploitation is un-Jewish, that dishonesty is sinful, that bigotry is a violation of God's law.

The third function of the synagogue is, of course, its primary one: a House of Prayer. The synagogue is a hall of study and a place of charity, but first and foremost it is a House of Prayer.

It is quite appropriate that a synagogue bear these three functions of study, prayer, and charity. For as the source and the origin of sanctity in the community, the synagogue is truly a microcosm, a miniature Jewish world; and the world, as we know from the Ethics of the Fathers (1:2) rests on three pillars: on study, on prayer, and on charity or good deeds.

Of all these, it is probably prayer which nowadays proves most difficult. We must make every effort to reconcile the two requirements of, on the one hand, dignity and decorum, and on the other, warmth and zeal and participation. It is simply untrue that the two of them are incompatible. We must not give up either of them. We do know that endless conversation and idle chatter

kill both dignity and kavvanah. But we must be determined to attain both. For if the synagogue cannot succeed in its primary function of tefillah, it cannot expect to succeed in talmud Torah and in gemilut hasadim.

All this is a difficult task -- to teach Torah and to encourage charity and to provide the opportunities for true prayer, in its highest sense.

There are people who successfully attempt to study and who respond to appeals for philanthropy. Yet despite all their genuine efforts to engage in prayer, that magic kindling of inspiration seems painfully absent; the feeling of standing before the Presence of God somehow fails to seize them. Their complaint is: we cannot pray. We would like to, but we do not know how. We feel we are only taking up space, we are only sitting in the House of God, not doing anything.

The problem is a serious one, and we cannot deal with it adequately here. But let me urge those who earnestly and genuinely yearn for a moment of true prayer that they not be impatient with their spiritual progress. Those who are today only yoshvei betekah, those who merely dwell or sit in Thy House, will, if they are strong and patient and steadfast enough, yet learn to achieve true prayer -- ode yehallelukha selah, those who dwell in Thy House will yet praise Thee (Ps. 84:5). And when this spiritual purpose has been fulfilled, and true prayer has been achieved --

then ashrei, happy and blessed are those who waited and tried and succeeded.

Ashrei ha-am she-kakhah lo, blessed is the people that this is their lot (Ps. 144:15).