

## THE SYNAGOGUE

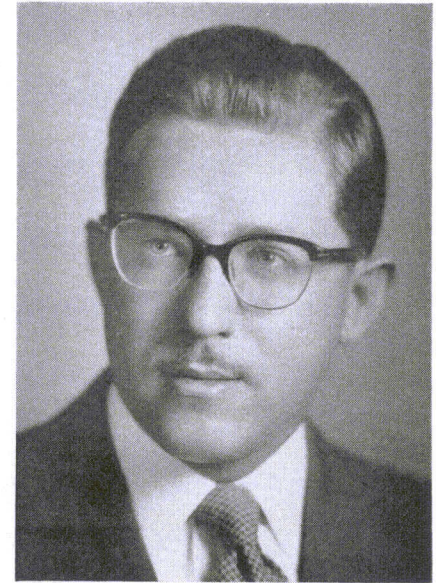
by

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No institution established by man has a longer continuous history than the synagogue. Its roots run so deep in the sands of time that it is difficult to uncover their exact origin. It is known, however, that during the Babylonian exile – over 2500 years ago – the synagogue achieved the permanence which it has retained to the present day.

The conditions that stimulated the development and growth of one of the noblest creations of man at this particular time in history dramatically convey its meaning and purpose for all time. The glory and grandeur of Israel's first commonwealth came to an end at this period as the cord which bound the nation was severed by the onslaughts of Nebuchadnezzar. The people of Israel was fragmentized and dispersed. Prematurely torn from its land, traumatically shocked by the destruction of its Holy City and Temple, the catastrophically distraught nation seemed destined to wither and die. Without nourishment from the motherland and with sudden exposure to a dis-



tinctly different atmosphere the breath of life was about to expire. But something happened which had never before happened in history.

This weak and subjugated people, driven as a leaf in the winds, was miraculously reborn and with unparalleled fortitude carried on the sacred traditions of its faith. The prophets and the people stubbornly resisted the climactic impact of a strange and foreign climate, gathered together to preserve the corporate body by the warmth of fellowship and breathed a new life into it through the inspiration of the Scriptures. These meetings dealt death-defying blows to the disintegrating forces around them by calling the people to prayer and repentance for the lapses of the past and by recalling the ennobling teachings of their faith.

The dual purpose of these gatherings, which were later given the name synagogue – meaning assembly – was then established as the pattern for all future generations. Henceforth, the people of Israel would assemble

in prayer to the One God, Creator of the universe, and in devout study of His holy word. The development of the peculiar sensitivity of the Jew towards God, of an unquenchable thirst for God and of a deep inwardness expressing the devotion of the heart became the primary goal of the synagogue. Inextricably intertwined with devotion was the immersion in the revealed word of God, the exposition of its meaning to man and the acceptance of this Torah as a guide to human conduct.

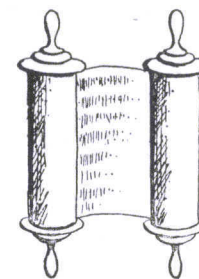
The dynamic force of this concept of the synagogue spread with the Jew throughout the world and its service of prayer and religious instruction was incorporated by both Christianity and Mohammedanism. Underhill, one of the most perceptive of Christian scholars, has acknowledged this debt in the following statement:

To the synagogue we owe the ordered framework of our institutional worship, its balance of adoration and instruction, thanksgiving, supplication, and responsive prayer, its historical and moral emphasis, and much of the actual material which it still employs. But beyond these, our greatest debt to Judaism is the quality of that realistic conception of God and realistic attitude to God which it bequeathed to the Church.

The construction of an edifice dedicated to God is in itself an act of worship for it requires devotion, inspiration and "offerings of the heart." It marks the end of the beginning of its fulfillment. The other phases must now be carried on. Nominal membership in a synagogue, even regular attendance or "visits" do not fulfill its purpose unless they are motivated by a yearning to serve God and by a determination to carry out His precepts in daily activity. Poise, dignity, and propriety are only incidentally valuable to prayer. Spectator worship where the leader is expected to pray for all is foreign to the Jewish idea of prayer. The smug attitude which challenges the synagogue to move, stir, or sway the "audience" smacks of superficiality if not irreverence.

The synagogue stands as a constant reminder to the Jew of the historical character of his being as a people of God, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." It provides the opportunity for piercing the outward crust of sham which envelops us and for communing with God and confiding in Him our innermost thoughts and feelings. It is an open door beckoning the Jew to observe the Sabbaths and the Festivals, to study the Torah and to follow its precepts. It is an integrating force combining both body and soul of man, making him a whole person and giving meaning and value to his life. Indeed, it is the means of inspiring and elevating all men and uniting mankind in cooperative, harmonious and creative endeavors. This is the assurance of Almighty God by words of the prophet:

*"For Mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."*



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