



CONGREGATING AND
CONSECRATING AT
CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE

THE BUILDING OF
A RELIGIOUS FELLOWSHIP
AND PUBLIC CEREMONIES

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NEW YORK, NEW YORK



The Congregation and the City

Introduction

The rebuilding and rededication of Central Synagogue after the 1998 fire serves as a fitting emblem of both the congregation's remarkable longevity in the same neighborhood and its phoenix-like capacity to reinvigorate itself. The synagogue has repeatedly honored its history in public ceremonies, from the December, 1870 laying of the cornerstone to the September 9, 2001 rededication, as well as through celebrations of anniversaries. On these occasions, the congregation has reached out and brought a larger public into its own fellowship, affirming members' reciprocal ties to the City of New York. Behind the public ceremonies stands an institutional story of how members built and sustained their synagogue, often in the face of daunting challenges. After all, one cannot take for granted that because an institution is strong in one generation, it will survive in the next. New York City's dynamism, the movement of people in and out or from downtown to uptown, the rise of cultural practices that compete with the religious life, the tensions that sometimes emerge between generations or between classes, the economic pressures of maintaining institutions, including preserving and restoring old buildings—all these forces impinge on the life of congregations. And yet the vitality of a congregation is also forged through its active engagement with the life of the city, in its institutional contributions and in the contributions of individual members. This essay looks at some of the ways that Central Synagogue's congregations folded the changing conditions of city life into their own history.



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This history matters not only to members of the congregation, but to New Yorkers who seek to understand how the city's voluntary associations have sustained themselves. Taking cues from the nineteenth-century French sociologist Alexis DeTocqueville, contemporary political philosophers and sociologists have wondered whether Americans are falling away from traditions of association—whether for purposes of worship or socializing—that have long been a mainstay of democratic public life, a focal point of collective activity that counters corrosive forces of individualism in a market society.¹ To assess the capacity of Americans to govern themselves, to care for one another, and to maintain a shared sense of spiritual purpose, historians of religion have urged that more attention be paid to congregations.² To ask how Central Synagogue has changed over generations in relation to the city, then, is to take a small sliver of a larger inquiry into the intersecting histories of congregations and American democracy.

The outlines of Central Synagogue's history have been well sketched in Andrew Dolkart's *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood*, the first essay in this series.³ As German and Bohemian Jews emigrated in the mid-nineteenth century and settled in New York, they adopted the American congregational model for organizing their religious life. This congregational order contrasted to the communal order of Europe, where synagogues operated under a centralized Jewish authority, tacitly authorized, in turn, by the state. The formation of new temples by congregations that shared a particular



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nearly one hundred members, and those who could not contribute resigned their membership. The staff took a cut in pay, while the trustees hired a comptroller to take administrative charge of its fiscal affairs. Yet, as the international crisis moved to the center stage, the organizational worries of the congregation receded in proportion to the support it gave Rabbi Jonah Wise in his highly visible initiatives on behalf of international Jewish relief.³⁷

Preserving the Urban Congregation

The unity among Reform congregations that followed not only the Holocaust but also the creation of the state of Israel provided a new context for revival following World War II. After a decade or more of stagnation, membership began to grow in the 1950s, even as the sphere of competition was redefined by the rise of new, prosperous, and energetic synagogue centers in the suburbs of Long Island, Westchester County and Northern New Jersey. To a certain degree, Central Synagogue, like other congregations, redirected its sense of “community service” toward the members themselves, and both congregational programs and the administrative apparatus to oversee them expanded in the 1950s and 1960s.

All congregations benefited, of course, from the baby boom and parents’ anxious desire to provide their children with a foundation of religious training. Yet, the very link between new families and new members also intensified turnover within the ranks of congregations, as members joined and resigned by the calendar of their children’s birthdays. Central Synagogue’s total membership



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DEFINING
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Public Ceremonies Defining Central Synagogue

Introduction

Glancing even in a cursory fashion at Central Synagogue's historical timeline one is struck by the congregation's penchant for celebrating anniversaries. In November 1896, Ahawath Chesed (later Central Synagogue) marked the 50th anniversary of its founding on the Lower East Side. In 1922, 1927, 1936 and 1946, the congregation celebrated the 75th, 80th, 90th and 100th anniversary of its beginnings. The congregation commemorated other historical events as well. In 1970 it celebrated the centennial of the laying of the cornerstone of the present synagogue building. (Five years later the building was designated a National Historic Landmark.) Then in 1979, Central Synagogue marked the 140th anniversary of Shaar Hashomayim's beginnings, the congregation which in 1898 merged with Ahawath Chesed. As if to make amends for the belated recognition of its older but smaller sister congregation, ten years later Central Synagogue marked the 150th anniversary of Shaar Hashomayim's founding, and in 1998 observed the centennial of the amalgamation of the two. Thus the congregation could claim priority of historical place over such venerable congregations as Rodeph Sholom and Emanu-El. Most recently, on September 9, 2001, the congregation rededicated its restored temple three years after fire had nearly destroyed it.¹

These festivities were elaborate affairs, carefully arranged and lavishly executed. The trustees appointed special committees to plan the various aspects of the celebrations. Reports were submitted,



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Anniversaries and their Agendas

More than a generation separated the fiftieth jubilee and the 90th anniversary celebration. During most of those years, the congregation faced the social and financial strains of a changing neighborhood and static membership. From the archival records, Elizabeth Blackmar and Andrew Dolkart have described Ahawath Chesed's efforts to cope with the vicissitudes of social and cultural inertia: merging with Shaar Hashomayim, completing the transition to an English language institution, replacing the congregation's hyphenated, "foreign" name with "Central Synagogue," introducing programs of social service and adult education, offering a place for women in the governance of the congregation, and most decisively, establishing a community house in 1926 to reach out to the younger generation. That year Rabbi Jonah Bondi Wise began his long and forceful ministry, which ended with his death in 1959.

The 1936 anniversary, the 90th, fell in the midst of increasing anxieties. At home, an aggressive, vocal antisemitism that went beyond the endemic prejudices upwardly mobile Jews encountered was a source of profound concern. Charles Coughlin, the radio priest whose Sunday coast-to-coast broadcasts became more stridently anti-Jewish as the 1930s progressed, was only one of the disturbing voices. In the city itself a growing anti-Jewish militancy spilled over into threatening demonstrations. Nearby Yorkville had its branches of the Friends of the New Germany, the predecessor of the German-American *Bund*. In the presidential cam-