

Visiting a Synagogue

Things You Should Know Before Your Visit

Synagogue is a Greek word meaning **leading together**. A synagogue is a building for the Jewish community to use together.

A synagogue is a special place and when you visit you must be careful to behave respectfully, just as you would if you were visiting a church, mosque or temple.

When Jewish men and boys go to the synagogue they cover their heads as a mark of respect. Most often the head covering is a small skull cap called a **kippah**. When you visit a synagogue boys and men will probably be asked to wear something on their heads. The synagogue may have a collection of kippot for visitors to borrow.



There are several words that Jews may use instead of synagogue:

Shul is a Yiddish word meaning **school**;

Bet Ha-Midrash is a Hebrew name meaning **House of Study**;

Study and learning are very important in Judaism. Most Jewish communities use their synagogues as a place where adults and children can learn more about Judaism. There will usually be a religion school for children on a Sunday morning. The religion school is often called **cheder** (Yiddish for **room**) and adults may meet to study Torah or to learn about other aspects of Jewish knowledge.

Bet Ha-Tefillah is Hebrew for **House of Prayer**;

The synagogue is where Jews meet on Sabbaths and festivals to pray to God. In some synagogues there will be a special room, which is only used for prayer services. In others the same room will be used for prayers and for other activities at different times.

Bet Ha-Kneset means **House of Meeting**.

Jewish communities use their synagogues for all sorts of non-religious activities. They may use the synagogue for meetings, discussion groups, celebrations, youth clubs and many other activities.

In America, Synagogues are often called **Temples**.

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Features of a Synagogue

Every synagogue has 3 special features:

The Ark

At the front of the synagogue's main room there will be a special cupboard where the Torah scrolls are kept. This is called the **ark** or **aron ha-kodesh** which means **Holy Cupboard**. There may be curtains in front of the ark. The ark is usually at the eastern end of the synagogue, because that is the direction towards Jerusalem, where the temple used to be.

The Everlasting Lamp

Near the ark there will be a lamp that is kept alight all the time. This is called the **ner tamid**, which means **everlasting light**. It is to remind people that God is always there.

The Bimah

The **bimah** is a raised platform where the Torah scrolls are opened and read out. The bimah may be in the middle of the synagogue or it may be right next to the Ark. We have a bimah to make it easier for everyone to see and hear while the Torah is being read.

As well as these 3 features there will be seating for the congregation and there may be a variety of decorations.

Most synagogues are named after the area or district they are in. Many Jewish communities also have a second name that they choose for themselves, such as "The Community of the House of Abraham" or "The Community of the House of Peace".

Although there are many different kinds of Judaism, they fall into 2 main groups, orthodox and progressive. Orthodox Jews take a more traditional approach to their faith; progressive Jews take a more modern approach to it eg. in an orthodox synagogue, men and women will sit separately; in a progressive synagogue men and women often sit together.

Name.....

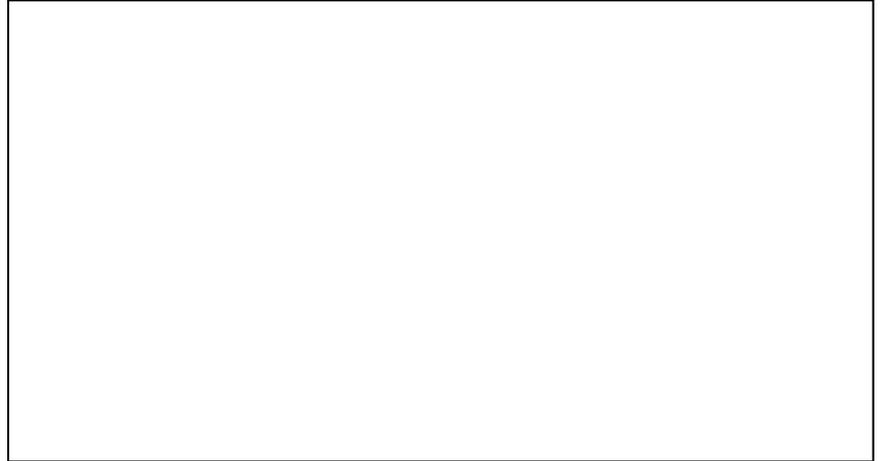
Date

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At the Synagogue

1. Which synagogue are you visiting? _____
2. Does the community have a name? If so, what is it? _____
3. Is the community at this synagogue *orthodox* or *progressive*? _____

4. Make a *quick* (bird's eye view) sketch map of the room where services are held. Show the **ark**, the **bimah** and the **ner tamid**. Show which way is east. Is the bimah near the ark or is it in the middle of the room? Which way do the rows of seats face?



5. What are the decorations like? Are there pictures? Do they show people, such as famous characters from Bible stories? _____

6. Is the main room used *only* for prayer services? How can you tell? _____

7. Do men and women sit together or separately? _____
8. Does the synagogue have a *motto* or *slogan* written on the ark or near it? If so, can you find out what it means? (It will probably be written in Hebrew). _____

9. Does the synagogue have a **cheder**? _____ What other studying takes place there? _____

10. Can you find any other evidence that the synagogue is used for study? _____

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11. What evidence can you find that the synagogue is used for other activities that are not connected with prayer or Jewish study? _____

Use this space to make notes about other things that you learned or noticed during your visit.

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Teachers' Notes

Pronunciations:

Shul : To rhyme with school

Ner Tamid : *Ner* to rhyme with *air*.

Cheder : ch as in *loch*.

Aron hakodesh : ah-ron huh-ko-desh

Bet hamidrash : bet huh-midrush,

Bet hatefillah : bet huh-te'fillah,

Bet haknesset : bet huh-k'nesset

Bimah : bee-muh

At the Synagogue:

1. Names:

Many Jewish communities choose a name for themselves. American communities often use their name as the name of their synagogue. In the UK it is more common for the synagogue to be called after its location. For instance a community might call itself **Kehillah Chaim** (Community of Life) or **Kehillah Bet Miglat** (Community of the House of Refuge) whilst it is known to the outside world as **West Bagelton and District Synagogue**.

2. Synagogue Designs

Orthodox synagogues often have the bimah centrally placed. Reform and progressive communities are more likely to have the bimah directly in front of the ark. Similarly, orthodox synagogues often have a separate women's area, often in an upstairs gallery (usually called, "The Ladies' Gallery"); alternatively there may be curtain separating the men's from the women's area. In progressive synagogues it is quite common for men and women to sit together.

There are no particular rules about either the internal or external designs of a synagogue. There is always a ner tamid; the ark is usually placed so that when facing it you are facing the direction of Jerusalem.

3. Decorations

The 2nd commandment forbids the making of likenesses and any pictures or paintings on display, especially in the room used for prayer, are likely to be abstract. Many synagogues will have no pictures at all, but may have decoration.

Many of the objects in a synagogue will have been given to the community in memory of someone. Look out for small memorial plaques attached to windows, decorations, furniture etc.

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4. Clues to the Uses of the Main Room

If the room is used exclusively for prayer, the seats may well be fixed (like pews in a church), in which case they may well have boxes underneath for members to store their tallitot (prayer shawls) and prayer books. Orthodox Jews will not carry even these things on the Sabbath, so leave them in their “box”. If the room has multiple purposes the furniture is more likely to be easily movable and there may well be an extra curtain to cover the ark during times when the room is put to secular use.

5. Motto

Many synagogues display a religious motto (in Hebrew) on or near the ark. Two common mottos are:

Know before whom you stand.

Serve the lord with joy.

6. Study

The primary study event in most synagogues will be the **Cheder**. (Cheder is a Yiddish word meaning “room”. How many children attend the cheder on a Sunday morning?)

In addition, there may well be adult education and/or discussion groups on Sundays or weekday afternoons or evenings, a Torah study group before or after the Sabbath service, possibly with refreshments (eg some communities have regular *Torah breakfasts*). There may be all sorts of other learning / study activities (which may be secular as well as religious in nature) such as learning a language or a reading group.

There may be a library of religious and study texts.

7. Community

If there is a library, it may also contain secular books of Jewish interest.

There will probably be a kitchen (almost certainly vegetarian, to avoid problems associated with maintaining kashrut (ie the dietary rules – particularly those associated with not mixing milk and meat products)).

After every Sabbath morning service there will be kiddush (usually pronounced to rhyme with *bush* but some Jews will say kiddish to rhyme with *fish*), when the sharing of wine and bread is followed by time to socialise with fellow members of the community.

Many synagogues hold daytime clubs for various members of the community. Many communities support a women’s club, often called The Ladies’ Guild, and a club for the elderly. Some even maintain their own kindergartens or schools.

Most synagogues will have a hall or large room where celebrations following weddings and bar mitzvahs (technically, the plural of bar mitzvah is *b’nei mitzvot*) can take place.

Like many religious communities, synagogues are largely self-supporting and fundraising socials such as dances, concerts, quizzes and theatrical events are commonplace.

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8. People

Depending on the synagogue, your visit may be supervised by a rabbi or a lay member of the community. Some synagogues put a lot of effort into school visits and there may be a school visits team who will organise the visit for you and explain things to the children.

Rabbi means “teacher”; rabbis are highly trained in Jewish law, ethics, prayer, history, custom etc. (rabbinical training takes around 5 years) but they are not priests* in the way that Christian clerics are. Rabbis are employed by their communities. A community does not need to have a rabbi, although most will employ at least one.

* Rabbis and Priests

Traditionally, the title, Rabbi, was given to any man who was considered to be very knowledgeable in matters relating to Jewish law and custom. These days it is a title gained by several years (usually 4-5) of intense study in a specialised college and is a qualification that both men and (especially in progressive Jewish communities) women can earn.

According to Wikipedia:

A priest is a religious leader authorized to perform the sacred rituals of a religion, especially as a mediatory agent between humans and one or more deities. They also have the authority or power to administer religious rites; in particular, rites of sacrifice to, and propitiation of, a deity or deities.

- In Judaism there are no religious roles that cannot be performed by any member of the community who knows how; any knowledgeable adult can lead services or conduct the religious aspects of rites of passage such as weddings or funerals. However, rabbis often do these things because they are knowledgeable.
- Judaism takes the view that interaction with God is personal and individual. For Jews no-one else can say prayers for another person or intercede with God on another person’s behalf. Judaism gave up the idea of priests when the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE (CE is the religiously neutral equivalent of AD - it means *Common Era*).
- Community rabbis (not every rabbi works for a local community) are employed by their communities to be the local Jewish expert. However, (especially in progressive communities) rabbis will often lead services and take on the sort of pastoral role that priests and ministers do in other faiths.