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# A Brief History of Space: Congregation Har HaShem and the Construction of Community in Frontier Synagogues

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**A Brief History of Space: Congregation Har HaShem and the Construction of Community  
in Frontier Synagogues**

By Sally Simpson | History, Linguistics, Jewish Studies

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors  
from the Department of History of at the University of Colorado Boulder

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## **Abstract**

The synagogue evolution of the West is part of a larger trend in synagogue history in the United States. Jews were historically a group with limited freedoms in Europe, but upon immigrating to America, they were able to express themselves more openly. One of the major ways in which they expressed themselves were the designs of their synagogues. Often meant to represent some larger value, such as democracy or a return to tradition, synagogues became focal points of both religious worship and Jewish identity. Congregation Har HaShem, a synagogue in Boulder, Colorado, was founded nearly two hundred years after the first Jews began innovating in the United States, but it represented a new chapter in the history of the synagogue: total freedom. The East Coast had offered Jews an inlet into a wider culture that had been closed to them in Europe, but the frontier allowed Jews to take their expression a step further. No longer did they have to buy into American culture to protect themselves, but rather they were able to shape American culture and themselves free of fear. Har HaShem was a small synagogue that represented a minority population in a frontier community, but it was a congregation that found a unique identity through its geography, ideology, and architecture.

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## **Introduction**

Congregation Har HaShem, Boulder's first synagogue, was established by a group of families in the Boulder area, each whom came to the region for diverse reasons. The only Jewish groups in Boulder prior to Har HaShem had been affiliated with the University of Colorado, the major institution in the city, but the wider community felt adrift without a home for their own spirituality. Originally known as the Boulder Jewish Fellowship, Har HaShem was first a social group that held community betterment as a value. Only later did the Fellowship begin offering worship services, but even then it did not see itself as a synagogue. Once it had raised the funds to build a space specifically representative of a synagogue it declared itself a congregation for worship. This evolution took the congregation around ten years to complete; the first few years were spent in religious limbo, with arguments arising about bringing rabbis to Boulder, but with no resolution. In the mid-1960s, the congregation finally came together and decided that creating a religious space was a priority. This, however, was not the end of the dilemmas faced by the burgeoning group; many congregants disagreed on dogma and aspects of the physical building. Most importantly, it took time and financial maneuvering to raise the money necessary to build a synagogue for worship. It is clear from the archival materials, however, that building a synagogue was one of the essential prerequisites to declaring the Boulder Jewish Fellowship community a congregation.

One of the first major issues the community faced was a name: they settled on Har HaShem, Mountain of God, because it represented their historic past and geographic present; the natural space in which this population lived shaped their synagogue in ways that had not been possible in East Coast urban communities. Boulder, Colorado, is a city situated at the base of spectacular rock formations and as a place, it prides itself on its natural features. There is no

doubt that the Jews who founded Har HaShem would have also felt strongly about their environment. Not only is natural space important to the residents of Boulder: it is almost impossible to ignore. The Flatiron Mountains create a backdrop noticeable from almost everywhere in the city, and the wide fields that surround Boulder themselves are in sharp contrast to those mountains. The synagogue itself is constructed from a red-brown brick that mimics the appearance of the Flatirons, and its flat roof and sharp lines contrast the jettisons of rock that make up the mountains. Looking at images of the building when it was first constructed, one can see that it appears alone in a field, foregrounded to the seemingly commanding backdrop of the mountains.<sup>1</sup> The wide frontiers had not been fully developed in the 1960s, so Har HaShem was able to capitalize on the frontier attitude when it was constructed. The synagogue asserts its independence in the surviving images, playing off of the mountains structurally, but certainly separately. This assertion is that moment of connection between abstract and absolute: the space has a definite, powerful use, but its message is far more open-minded and modern. Such a strong statement is akin to the tradition of American synagogues: they tell a story for the people viewing them.

The history of the synagogue in America is a topic that has long fascinated historians, but the psychology of the synagogue has been far less researched. This psychology is what the synagogue means to the community in which it is built; its function as a safe space for Jews and as a religious one, as well a place where life cycle events are celebrated. The synagogue is a place of gathering for Jewish communities that allows Jews to come together in moments of heightened emotional states whether it be panic, as many did at Har HaShem in 1973 during the

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<sup>1</sup> Photograph. No date. Box 2, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

Yom Kippur War, but also celebrations and family life cycles, as Sara-Jane Cohen, a congregant of Congregation Har HaShem explained during an oral history.<sup>2</sup> Such a building, one that houses moments of such joy and suffering, presents a psychologically and historically rich experience. To explore the history without the psychological aspects would leave out a major feature of the story. Synagogues are inherently metaphorical, thus abstract, spaces because they are spaces in which worship to an intangible God takes place. However, the clear power structures of religion and the institutions of learning housed in synagogues, while changed in Reform Jewish practice, create a rigidity reminiscent of a more historical kind of space, space which Henri Lefebvre, a French theorist whose work will be integral to this project, considers based on power dynamics. The history and metaphor of a space are important elements to this project that will be explained later.

Jews, especially those living in peripheral communities in the West, came together to remain a community. People were geographically spread out in the time of pioneers, and having a communal space allowed them to feel as though they were living somewhere more established. Especially for Judaism, a communal religion that requires prayer quorums, the idea of a community center was attractive. In the American West, however, rabbis were few and far between, and the traditions that had held their ancestors together were thousands of miles away. Western Jews looked eastward to remind themselves of the traditions they were to follow, and East Coast Jews looked to Europe to remind themselves of the past from which they came. This distance from the loci of Judaism and Jewish identity made the Western synagogue even more central in the daily lives of Jews living in the community. It was the single place where Jews

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Sara-Jane Cohen. October 26, 2016. Congregation Har HaShem Oral Histories. Boulder, Colorado.

could come together and feel a sense of tradition, where they taught their children about their history, and where they prayed to God.

As alluded to in the opening paragraph of this project, an important piece of this argument is the consideration of spaces, particularly when viewed through the ideas of Henri Lefebvre, a French theorist who theorized the production of space. His work has given this project a vocabulary with which to work; with his definitions and interpretations of space, it has been possible to describe the phenomena that occur within synagogues. Lefebvre's major contribution to this project is most visibly displayed in three terms: natural space, absolute space, and abstract space. These spaces exist both in the physical world and in the minds of people. Historically, this has led to physical change in the world: Roman temples were appropriated by Christians, cities were designed and redesigned in the fashions of the day, and even places as small as single-family homes changed to incorporate dynamics that were relevant to the period. Natural space is nature, perceived as unchanged by humans. Absolute and abstract space, on the other hand, have far more complicated relationships both to the natural space they are designed to shape and to one another; social dynamics must be taken into account when exclusively discussing abstract space. These social dynamics are what give direction to buildings in the modern age and by discussing Congregation Har HaShem through this theoretical lens, it is possible to clearly highlight the relationship between tradition and innovation, a relationship that preoccupies Western American synagogues.

As a literal example of social dynamics giving direction to space, and to return to the significance of the architecture of Jewish places of worship, synagogues traditionally face eastwards in the United States, pointing towards Jerusalem. A space designed for Jewish



worship, then, always longs for another geographic space.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned previously, peripheral communities sought validation in imitation of the groups from which they had split, but they also felt a need to reimagine what being a Jew was to them. Creating spaces that longed for a distant memory across an ocean was a hugely important way for Jews to feel connected to the Holy Land. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in western American synagogues, where the geography reflected an entirely new kind of community. Especially on the Front Range, where mountains created a western backdrop that was both picturesque and like a wall, the terrain of the area created a natural eastward pull: it was easier to travel eastward as there was nothing visibly blocking the way to Jerusalem. Conceptually, this exemplified the importance of space: the building must be constructed in a way that felt spiritual to its congregants. By building the sanctuary to face east, people believed in the connection to Judaism within the synagogue. It is then the congregants who give the building its metaphorical meaning because of this physical meaning.

There are three main elements to this project: the first is the theory Lefebvre offers in his book *The Production of Space*. It creates a framework by which one can understand the metaphorical and historical motivations in the minds of the people constructing synagogues. It also creates a vocabulary with which one can describe the abstract aspects of this project. The next element is a careful analysis of the primary source documents found in Congregation Har HaShem's archival material will tie together the preceding two elements. As a case study, Har HaShem illustrates Lefebvre's theories with specific details and first-person accounts of the difficulties faced by a community. Finally, this paper will discuss the historical precedent that led

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<sup>3</sup> Though this tradition is not maintained in every synagogue, an eastward facing sanctuary is common enough that most Ashkenazi Jews consider it formal law to construct their buildings in such a fashion.

to Congregation Har HaShem. Exploring the history of synagogue-building in America and the apparent meaning behind historical synagogues, as well as the history of Jews in America and their relationships to one another and to non-Jewish groups, creates a foundation on which to present Har HaShem as both innovative and nonetheless following a long history of synagogues reflecting a fusion of global Judaism with the intimacy of a local community's needs. The secondary material is not scant, but the presentation of the history of the American synagogue is necessarily brief; this project, though concerned with the distant past of synagogues, sets out mainly to discuss Har HaShem. Producing a space is not an easy task, and much of the secondary literature on the topic creates a smooth narrative that is not apparent when one looks at primary source data. The creation of Har HaShem was a long and arduous process; many iterations of blueprints were drawn to create a beautiful structure, and even then the permanence of that building was in question. These elements together produce a paper focused on both the physical structure of the synagogue and the psychological attitudes of the people who built that synagogue.

The synagogue, Ancient Greek for “bringing together,” exists as a physical space in a specific geographic location.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the history of Judaism, the function of the synagogue has changed to suit the time in which people lived and yet has always reflected some common notion of people connected to a spiritual center in Jerusalem. Nowhere is the building more evolved than in America, where for the first time in centuries, Jews were fully free to worship and present themselves as they wished. This freedom allowed them to experiment on a much greater scale than they had historically in Europe, which led to far larger innovations in

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<sup>4</sup> Barry L. Stiefel and Samuel Gruber, *Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World: A Social and Architectural History*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 10.

synagogue structure. Parallel to the evolution of the synagogue was the evolution of the Jewish community. Jews had certainly developed culturally specific peculiarities in Europe, but ethnically and nationally diverse groups of Jews lived very closely to one another in the United States and, in early times, chose to come together despite differences in religious practice. Specific values, then, had to be articulated to the community so they understood what variety of service they would receive at any particular synagogue and what ideology underpinned the values of any particular Jewish community. This too was possible because of the strict separation of church and state in the United States, which ironically led to a flourishing of religious innovation. No matter how innovative a community could be, however, Judaism is primarily a religion rooted in thousands of years of history. The retelling of its foundation is the central cycle of the worship services and a longing to return to a promised land is ostensibly the goal of the religion. Thus, despite innovation, Jews continue to adhere quite strictly to a set of practices that connect them to one another and to their history. This cultural consciousness is reflected in the buildings as well; synagogues that face East and continue to repeat the history of Moses and the prophets yearly pay homage to the larger Jewish history.

Congregation Har HaShem is an innovative community, deeply influenced by the natural space that surrounds it. But, given its peripheral status from major Jewish centers, it felt a need to create reminders of the epicenters of Judaism, thus it adheres to some tradition to do so. Congregants constantly fought over defining features of their synagogue. It reflects a long, historical narrative of defining a community by its building, but it also breaks the mold because the architecture, and therefore the meaning, of its building was so fluid: it was built in stages to allow for even more debate about religious identity and space usage, and thus innovation. Its congregants came together as Boulder's first synagogue, and perhaps that is why they were so

hesitant to label themselves as Reform or Conservative Jews; like the historical synagogues in Europe, it saw itself as the single hub of Jewish life in an otherwise non-Jewish community. Its priority was to welcome all Jews before it felt a need to define itself by any single label. After all, this is one of the synagogue's most traditional features. In this way, space is a concept that has been transformed by people throughout time, but the space that a synagogue embodies is singularly unique. Har HaShem is a frontier synagogue that tried to maintain contact to a wider Jewish world, but ultimately had to change itself for the sake of its community.

The major issue in writing a history of twentieth-century American Jews is that most authors who choose to write about Jews in the United States choose to do so about those Jews who founded early synagogues and movements. Those Jews lived primarily in the nineteenth century, or at latest between World War I and World War II. There is a dearth of information regarding Jewish synagogues in mid-twentieth-century America. Relating Jewish experience to parallel Protestant experiences in the United States is a common way of narrating the history of American Jews. And yet, while Protestant mimicry certainly influenced Jewish community, Jews were looking back on a longer history than the Protestants and had traditions that were inseparable from the Jewish experience. Most histories of the Jews in America end at the turn of the twentieth century, when synagogues finally began to spread openly across the country and when Jews began to advocate for themselves publically. In doing so these histories miss an entire chapter in the history of the American Jewish community— the emergence of the “synagogue-center.” Some books, however, do detail this center, but even so, those books remain strictly focused on East Coast synagogues. Synagogue-centers, Jewish community buildings that housed both religious and social activities, were, of course, more common in East Coast cities where the number of Jews allowed for a plurality of synagogues in a single geographic area. The frontier, it

seems, had its population too spread apart and too small for focus in major works. It is not a popular geographic location to highlight in the history of Jews in America.

Bryan Edward Stone's *Chosen Folks* focuses on Jews in Texas and the evolution of their communities. This particular group lived on the frontier and experienced many things that are quite similar what was happening in Boulder than histories that meditate on New York and the Atlantic Seaboard. Stone's history is overarching and brief; he discusses the history of Jews in Texas from its earliest days, before it was an American state, almost to the present moment. His scope is not limited, but rather attempts to capture a broad sweep of the political, social, economic, and religious history of Jews in Texas. While this wide view of the history is certainly helpful, it lacks in clarity and detail. It tries to focus on moments of particular relevance for Texan communities, such as encounters with the Ku Klux Klan and the Civil Rights Movement, but these moments are not the focus of its history. Rather, they are almost signposts of eras in the history of Texan Jews. Stone uses, for instance, the Civil Rights Movement to discuss Jews' relationship to other minority groups, but also to focus on the 1960s. Despite this, this monograph gives data about communities west of the Mississippi, something that was certainly lacking in other books. He is able to create a bridge between the East Coast groups and their western peers, something that has proved extremely useful for this project. For the sake of frontier Jewish history, it has been more helpful than almost any other source consulted.

Barry L. Stiefel's and Samuel Gruber's *Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World* was helpful in grounding this paper in architecture. Its focus is not on the United States of America, however, but rather on territories affected by Atlantic trade between approximately 1500 and 1800. Jewish refugees of Portugal and Spain during the Inquisition fled to the England and the Netherlands, and some even settled in colonies in North America. These Jews were the ones who

built the first Jewish communities in what became the United States, and their building design was hugely influential on the future generations of Jews.<sup>5</sup> Stiefel's work is both a history of the Jews in the Atlantic world and an architectural analysis. Not only does he discuss the political, economic, and social forces that encouraged Jews to move and allowed them to build spaces throughout the Atlantic, but he also discusses the physical appearance of those spaces, both external and internal.

Most interesting about his book are the synagogue schematics in the text that give the reader a sense of perspective, and the metaphorical and practical features of design are placed centrally throughout his work. However effective Stiefel is at identifying features of Jewish houses of worship in the Atlantic world, his scope is quite wide and he often jumps between entirely different locations. He will discuss Jamaica, the Netherlands, and the United States in short succession and often does not do so with any framework. The difficulty in gleaning information about Jews in the United States from this text comes primarily from this problem, as comparing Jews in mid-nineteenth-century England does little in a discussion about twentieth-century Americans. Despite this flaw, Stiefel is perhaps the only author of a monograph who has dedicated his work to the *architecture* of synagogues, rather than the spiritual changes of Jews within them.

Two books, *The Synagogue in America* and *the American Synagogue*, the first written by Marc Lee Raphael and the second edited by Jack Wertheimer, complement one another in a discussion about the evolution of American synagogues. Raphael's work is a history of the synagogue from the colonial period to 1980. His work focuses on the transition from Sephardic (Jews of Spanish origin) to Ashkenazi (Jews of German and eastern European origin) dominance

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<sup>5</sup> Stiefel 2.

in the United States and the defining factors of the different sects of Judaism. Essentially chronological in its approach to the history, Raphael discusses synagogues in different important political periods.

Wertheimer's collection is not chronological; he offers a "denominational perspective" first, followed by a much longer "thematic" section. His work picks specific issues important to the synagogue, ranging from education to case studies of specific synagogues throughout America. Together, these two books create a clear narrative history of the American synagogue, though in both cases, the information regarding post-World War II synagogues is both sparse and very specific. Unlike Stiefel's history of the building, these two works give a sense of the history of the interior of a space; they give information about the motivations of the Jews building synagogues. Both books focus on a flight from the city to the suburb in post-war America, a phenomenon not unique to the Jewish community, but one that certainly changed the way Jews worshipped. Both prove to be very useful for this project, as an outline of the years leading up to 1960 are essential in understanding the cultural consciousness of American Jews. Their limitations lie in the fact the authors make decisions about what facets of culture deserve attention and they tend to place weight on the first century of the United States and lose focus towards modernity.

David Kaufmann's *Shul with a Pool: The "synagogue-center" in American Jewish History* is the text most closely related to the primary source material for this project. It represents the most complete history of the twentieth-century movement towards "synagogue-centers," as he labels them. These synagogue-centers are the physical structure that represents the evolution of Jewish practice in twentieth-century America and thus this work is paramount to this project. Kaufmann argues that despite the reimagining of Judaism that occurred before 1900,

the 1920s were a renaissance of sorts for Reform Jewish identity. The initial wave of change had slowed by this point and new thinkers entered the scene to reinvigorate it. He takes a thematic approach to presenting information with each chapter labeled by an institution such as “temple,” “settlement,” or “school,” and then narrating the history of that institution through the twentieth-century. Coupled with Lefebvre’s theory, it fills in the gaps left by other works. Its focus on the twentieth century makes it extremely useful in creating a narrative timeline for the history of synagogues in America, but it seems to stray from synagogues frequently. Kaufmann discusses many forms of Jewish Community Centers, including completely non-religious centers in his discussions of synagogues and shuls. He does not draw a relationship between the religious and the social as strongly as he might and strays from the idea of *synagogue-center*.

A multitude of articles have also gone into the research for this project. Many articles have been written on various aspects of the Jewish experience in America, and these separate articles came together to form a sort of patchwork quilt of information. Much of their discussion relates directly to the longer books consulted for this project, and most of the articles do not focus on the frontier. Instead, many synagogues and Jewish centers themselves have website with brief histories of their existence, especially in the Western United States, which I have consulted.

### **HENRI LEFEBVRE’S *THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE***

Henri Lefebvre (June 16, 1901 - June 29, 1991) was a French theorist who primarily wrote about the production of space. The production of space, as he defines it, is a complicated process by which humans living in a geographic area come together and “perceive of, conceive of, and live in” a territory. These three layers are called spatial practice (the perceived), meaning the paradigmatic and structural components of life; representations of space (the conceived), or



the space designed by engineers and artists; and representational spaces (the lived), essentially how a space actually looks and the symbolic meaning behind it.<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre's argument is rooted in an entirely conceptual understanding of the term "space:" it seems to refer to buildings, cities, geographic territories, and even the Capitalist world. Space is something that people imagine, rather than something that exists objectively. Humans give names to something that does not consciously define itself, and those names often change as the culture inhabiting those places evolve. Specifically, this paper is interested in what Lefebvre primarily calls "absolute space" and "abstract space." The space that exists before human development is labeled as "natural space;" it is a place of nature that has yet to be changed by special practice, representations of space, or representational space. Absolute space is what humans do to natural space: it is, as Lefebvre writes, "made up of fragments of nature which were chosen for their intrinsic qualities (cave, mountaintop, spring, river) but whose very consecration ended up by stripping them of their natural characteristics and uniqueness."<sup>7</sup> Absolute space is political and religious by design and seeks to replace nature with itself, while maintaining the authority that nature seemed to give a given territory. It is followed by a hollower "abstract space." Abstract space, however, is defined by its negative relationship with absolute space. It has no subject, but rather is defined by the features that give it symbolism. Its central feature is the power that controls it and the social situations that take place within it. In a sense, it is a space in which people are reacting *against* the absolute space that preceded it.

The relationship between abstract and absolute space is essential in discussing Western synagogues; congregants must adhere to a tradition thousands of years old while also creating

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<sup>6</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd. 1991), 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 48.

something new by which to redefine themselves. While remaining essential, however, abstract space is not necessarily what is *created* by synagogues in the West, but rather what they become once they've produced a community.

Lefebvre has helped me think about how to approach Western synagogues in general and Congregation Har HaShem in particular. It is in the West that a particular American ideology about human relationship to the natural surroundings manifested itself most strongly, and it is also in the West where religious freedom could expand due to a lack of pre-existing social structures, save for the Native American ones that were destroyed by the nineteenth-century.

Against a backdrop of dramatic mountains and vast plains, travelers moved west to find opportunity for themselves and their communities. Those travelers settled in various areas at various times, and in settling they came to understand themselves as a part of the landscape in which they lived. Lefebvre discusses "natural space" at length. Unlike urban East Coast centers, in which Jewish communities built houses of worship, in Boulder, Har HaShem was conceived in the natural space of the wall of mountains to the west and the flat expanse to the east. East Coast synagogues were no longer confronted with natural space that they were tasked with transforming, but rather they had to fit into a representational space that was already made. Community-builders in the West, however, had the opportunity to turn their natural spaces into absolute spaces, defining themselves as communities in new ways. While a synagogue on the East Coast would have to identify itself within an already rigidly defined culture, a synagogue in the West could express itself in any multitude of ways.

Lefebvre argues that space is a concrete feature of the world, rather than an abstract framework because space is something produced and perpetuated by humans. The difference, then, between what nature does and what people do is that nature creates a sort of space, but

people produce a new, more sharply defined space within the natural space. Nature does not cognitively understand that which it creates, but rather simply creates things that exist without conscience.<sup>8</sup> Humans, however, give meaning to the things that they produce. A production, according to Lefebvre, inherently involves cognition. People live in their spaces, too, and “any spaces implies, contains, and dissimulates social relations.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, while a space begins as a utilitarian, physical place, it gains most of its identifying features by the metaphorical value it is given by its users. This combination of metaphorical and physical space allows social production within the space: people who occupy the space understand the metaphorical and the physical and their relationships are shaped by that dual feature of space.

Lefebvre discusses at length the relationship between abstract and absolute space. Though abstract space mainly finds itself in deep, urban environments, the moment of conversion from absolute space to abstract space is useful for this paper. Abstract space can be understood in layman’s terms as perhaps absolute space, produced from natural space, once it has been stripped of its religious and political productions. In a secular, urban city, absolute space necessarily becomes more abstract because the individuals living within the city will no longer identify with a singular creed: “the members of archaic societies obey social norms without knowing it - that is to say, without recognizing those norms as such. Rather, they live them spatially: they are not ignorant of them, they do not misapprehend them, but they experience them immediately.”<sup>10</sup> Space builds on a historical precedent that allows people to digest the rules of their society without having learned them consciously. However, those rules of society are inherently linked to the politico-religious attitude of their nation or community. An

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid 70.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 83.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 230.

abstract space seeks to tear down the societal expectations based on a historical narrative. This historical space might not find its place in the modern society just as it had before, but it remains in a representational space.<sup>11</sup> Absolute space began as space made of temples, fields, and spiritually significant locations. Those locations may have lost their literal meaning, but the dimensionality of the absolute space established by them remains. These dimensions thus shape future structures within the space and give unspoken parameters to what builders and users might expect of their space.<sup>12</sup> Absolute space dominated society throughout the Middle Ages because of the strict authority of the Church and strong reliance upon feudal relationships, but economic change marked a transformation in the conception of space in the Western World.

### **A Case Study: Congregation Har HaShem**

Boulder, Colorado was a small university town in the 1960s, but one with a growing population, many of whom were Jews. Jews had long inhabited the city of Boulder, but did so as an outlying community from the larger Denver Jewish community. They went to Denver for their Jewish communal activities, life cycle events, and other moments when they wanted Jewish community.

Approximately 20,000 people lived in Boulder during the 1950 census, according to the city of Boulder's official history.<sup>13</sup> Ten years later, five entrepreneurial Jews came together to

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<sup>11</sup> From Rome and the ancient Romans, the Christian tradition inherited, and carried down into the modern world, a space filled with magico-religious entities, with deities malevolent or benevolent, male or female, linked to the earth or to the subterranean (the dead), and all subject to the formalisms of rite and ritual. Antiquity's representations of space have collapsed: the Firmament, the celestial spheres, the Mediterranean as centre of the inhabited earth. Its representational spaces, however, have survived: the realm of the dead, chthonian and telluric forces, the depths and the heights. (Ibid 231.)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 240.

<sup>13</sup> No author. "Population Rising" in "History of Boulder," *the city of Boulder government*, no date.

found a “body capable of speaking for the Jewish Community with respect to community relations.”<sup>14</sup> They sent flyers to Jews in the Boulder area, and sixteen more families responded. For these men and their families, it was important to have a collective voice for Jews within the larger community that Boulder was quickly becoming.<sup>15</sup> In its earliest years, Har HaShem was known as the Boulder Hebrew Alliance, a name that may have echoed the Hebrew Educational Alliance in Denver, which some of the founders had likely attended, since it was on the west side of Denver and therefore closer than the east side Reform synagogue called Emanuel. Boulder’s “alliance” was not about bringing together disparate immigrant religious communities, but was about creating a collective Jewish voice.

Indeed, its earliest actions as a body were those of a social group rather than a synagogue, which meant long drives down Highway 36 for worship services and life cycle events. While the Fellowship certainly discussed creating a religious space, it was not until almost a decade later that the Boulder Hebrew Alliance, then known as the Boulder Jewish Fellowship, actually set into motion a plan to build a place for worship. The primary motivation for creating the community in Boulder was to create a social environment suitable to Jewish life, something it seems the drive down 36 was not worth. As it grew, it experienced growing pains not unlike most organizational bodies. Its conflicts over leadership and by-laws soon gave way to deeper, more conceptual disagreements. Members debated the importance of a kosher kitchen and the difference between Conservative and Reform movement affiliation. Such debates were the

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<sup>14</sup> Minutes of the meeting of the Boulder Hebrew Alliance held in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Selby. Box 1, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>15</sup> The respondents to the informational letter sent to local Jews were all men; wives seem to have been tangentially involved in the earliest years of the Boulder Hebrew Alliance, but no positions of authority were held by women at this time.

foundation of the spiritual identity of Congregation Har HaShem, and these kinds of Jewish communal choices were an innovation of Western Judaism.

The earliest documents from Har HaShem are ones that stress cohesion within the community. By April 25, 1960, the steering committee of the “Boulder Jewish Fellowship” had attracted a number of families, who discussed the purpose of the fellowship. Their ultimate goal was to formulate an “active program” for the following year, including an “informal get together” celebrating Yom Kippur.<sup>16</sup> Until then, most Jews in Boulder would travel to Denver to partake in Yom Kippur Services there. Some Boulder Jews would take part in Hillel celebrations on the University of Colorado campus, but it seems to have been difficult to integrate non-students into a student organization. This was the first moment when Jews in Boulder began to express themselves as a Boulder Jewish community, independent of Denver’s.

Attached to the meeting notice of April 25 is a first draft of the Fellowship’s constitution. The draft constitution outlined its mission and membership rules: “Membership shall be open to any adult or any family, who wishes to identify with this organization.” A second clause, excised by the secretary of the time, Saida Selby, reads, “by virtue of Jewish birth, religious affiliation to Judaism, family ties or marital relationship.”<sup>17</sup> Obviously some of the discussions at the meeting centered around who was welcome in the nascent community. Most of the elements of the constitution related to board organization, elections, and meeting regulations. Creating a system of governance for their new organization seems to have been the Fellowship’s first goal. They did, however, remove any mention of some kind of particular Jewish connection, and instead

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<sup>16</sup> “Meeting Notice.” April 25, 1960. Box 1, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>17</sup> “Boulder Jewish Fellowship Constitution.” No date, 1960. Box 1, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

welcomed anyone wishing to identify with their organization. In fact, Jewish religious affiliation does not appear in most of the early meeting minutes of the board. Rather the board was interested in acting as a voice for a particular set of liberal values outlined in the constitution, which reflected the values of Boulder's Jews. They were less interested in the specific Jewish origins of their individual members.

The constitution itself is a set of twelve points outlined by the Boulder Jewish Fellowship in early 1960. Many of its points are bureaucratic, ranging from the structure of the board, dues for the organization, and the amending and adopting of the constitution. Some, however, are more personal. As stated above, the third item on the list is "membership." In this item, the fellowship states that any "adult or family who wishes to identify with [the Boulder Jewish Fellowship]" should be allowed to do so.<sup>18</sup> The Fellowship also outlines its purpose in this document: "to foster the growth and development of the Jewish Community in Boulder and to engage in activities that will promote Jewish communal relationships."<sup>19</sup> This purpose is not religious. Its primary motivation is to create a community in Boulder, likely because the community in Denver was too far away to satisfy the daily needs of Boulder Jews. These particular items are not specific. They are vague and they leave much open to debate. They do, however, provide a glimpse into the minds of the founders. These people wanted to create a communal space, psychological and perhaps physical, for the Jews living in Boulder.

The Fellowship was preoccupied in its early years with advocacy in Boulder public schools preoccupied early board meetings. The 1960 board placed the issue of religious ceremony, specifically Christmas pageants and preference to discussions of Christianity, in

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<sup>18</sup> "Constitution" No date, 1960. Box 1, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Boulder public schools at the center of its advocacy. A fear that students who came from non-Christian backgrounds might be hurt by “the insistence of dogmatic presentations of one particular faith” led the board to elect a chairman to represent them in finding a way to communicate their fears to the public school system.<sup>20</sup> The board followed up on the problem of the public schools in their June board meeting, suggesting that they handle the matter with the school board informally, rather than creating a public scandal in their first year as an organization.

The issue of “Religion in School” culminated in the December 11, 1960 meeting of the Boulder Jewish Fellowship. Somewhere between June and December, the issue of religious education in the Boulder public schools became a legal issue. Both the Anti-Defamation League, a national Jewish advocacy organization with a branch in Denver, and the Episcopal Bishop of Denver had expressed support for the Boulder Jewish Fellowship’s cause. Growing public sentiment seemed to be in favor of removing, or at least diversifying, religious education from the curriculum. Boulder Public Schools had a history of teaching students about Christian holidays in the classroom and did not include discussions of other faiths in those lessons. However, the School Board seemed ready to relent to the “‘Pro-Religion’ forces.”<sup>21</sup> The solution came from the the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization dedicated to defending individual rights of people in the United States, who were brought in to assess the case.<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>20</sup> “Board Meeting.” April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1960. Box 1, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>21</sup> “Minutes of Meeting of Dec. 11, 1960.” December 11, 1960. Box 1, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>22</sup> “Elliot Goldstein, a guest, presented the position of the ACLU. He stated that the majority position of his organization was to go along with the School Board position [presumably to maintain religious neutrality in schools] for the time being, providing that the Board did not change its position. In the event that the Board would retract its position then the ACLU felt that its only recourse would be a court case.”



issue continued into 1961. In April a new school board was elected, but the problem of discussing Christianity in the public school classroom was not settled.

This legal and public issue was the impetus for founding a religious school structure under the auspices of the Boulder Jewish Fellowship. The board discussed the possibility of a Sunday School run by one of its own members, but decided that more discussion and a careful selection of teachers must happen before any school could be founded.<sup>23</sup> Such a school would teach school-aged children about Jewish religion and history, to supplement education they might be receiving in school. The founding of a supplementary religious school was not seriously considered until a year later, when the issue of the public schools seemed to have reach an impasse.<sup>24</sup> The Jewish religious school was to be housed at the offices of a Boulder Jewish Fellowship member's business until a more suitable location could be found.<sup>25</sup> The need for Jewish religious education was a concern that preceded the need for a building. Educating children— and perhaps via the children, their parents— about Jewish history, religion, and culture would allow them to understand the psychological elements of a building created for that religion.

Following national trends of the early 1960s emphasizing American Jews' commitment to liberal values and civil rights, the Boulder Jewish Fellowship involved itself publically with legal campaigns protecting the separation of religion and state and also was involved with non-Jewish people in the wider Boulder community with a particular focus on philanthropy. A “fund

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<sup>23</sup> No title. No date. Box 1, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>24</sup> The issue, known by then as “the Christmas-in-the-schools issue” was closed in September of 1961, when the Boulder Daily Camera published the school board's position, one that closely aligned with the Boulder Jewish Fellowship's lobbying efforts. (Minutes of General Meeting, September 28, 1961)

<sup>25</sup> “Minutes of General Meeting.” September 28, 1961. Box 1, folder 2, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

for helping stranded people that come through town” was established in May of 1961 to help migrants and others who were not establishing permanent residence.<sup>26</sup>

In 1962, the Boulder Jewish Fellowship was one of four major Jewish organizations in Boulder: the Jewish Sunday School, an offshoot of the Fellowship that was by this point semi-autonomous; the Jewish Women’s Club, again an organization that sprang from the Fellowship; and the Boulder Jewish Community Center (also referred to as a Community Club).<sup>27</sup> In June a proposal for a joint coordinating committee was presented to the Boulder Jewish Fellowship to create a more complete Jewish experience for Boulder residents.<sup>28</sup> This committee’s goal was to consider topics relevant to each organization individually and to assess Jewish efforts in the larger Boulder community. These separate organizations had diverse goals, and each represented a different group within the Boulder Jewish community at large. Some had spawned from the Fellowship and maintained close relations with them, but others had, since 1960, organized themselves separately. By coming together as a coordinated group, it was thought that they could better organize events and serve as a broader voice representing Boulder’s Jewish community. This coordinating committee seems to survive its initial inception as the “Ad Hoc Committee,” but nothing seems to have been accomplished by this committee until November 30.

On November 30, 1962 that the first mention of a building was recorded in the meeting minutes In this document, however, the building is only mentioned in terms of a merger with the

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<sup>26</sup> “Page 2, Minutes of the Regularly Scheduled General Meeting of May 10, 1961.” May 10, 1961. Box 1, folder 2, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> “A proposal for a Joint Co-ordinating [sic] Committee.” No date. Box 1, folder 3, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

Boulder Jewish Community Center.<sup>29</sup> The Community Center itself seems to have been constructed after the Boulder Jewish Fellowship was founded by a separate group of people. This merger that was suggested was because neither the Fellowship nor the Community Center had the funds in 1962 to build a center, and it was thought that by coming together they could collect the necessary money. Fellowship members decided to unite with this organization, and together build a structure for Jewish worship and for social activities.<sup>30</sup> The building fund itself was established by the Boulder Jewish Community Center and after the union of the two organizations, this fund was transferred to the Fellowship. By May 1963, only \$74 had been allocated to the building fund, a far cry from the total cost of a synagogue.<sup>31</sup>

Things continued to move slowly through 1964, with a motion being passed in April to explore possibilities of building a structure with B'nai B'rith (which had since become known as the Anti-Defamation League) or some other organization that was looking to establish roots in Boulder. In the same motion, it was also explicitly decided that the Building Committee was to “state in writing the objective, function, and prospective uses of the building.”<sup>32</sup> This motion did not call the building a synagogue, nor does it seem that anyone envisioned the space as a primarily ritual one. By August, however, the board began to look “towards the building of a religious center, and to promote Jewish activities, both social and cultural.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The Boulder Jewish Community Center is referred to as both a community center and a community club in various documents. It seems that these two names were interchangeable and did not refer to two separate entities.

<sup>30</sup> “Special Business Meeting.” November 39, 1962. Box 1, folder 3, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>31</sup> “Boulder Jewish Fellowship Treasurer’s Report.” May 19, 1963. Box 1, folder 4, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>32</sup> “Motion passed unanimously at the Boulder Jewish Fellowship Meeting of April 5, 1964.” April 5, 1964. Box 1, folder 5, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>33</sup> “Board Meeting.” August 18, 1964. Box 1, folder 5, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

This is the first moment in the archival record that a person first referred to the building as “religious” space, and the first place where religious, social, and cultural events are conflated in a single space. Previously, Hillel had operated as a religious center for the Jews of Boulder, as no one else had a rabbi or the infrastructure to house worship services. Various members’ homes had acted as legislative centers for the board, who met regularly but had no formal location in which to meet. Cultural events were held both at CU’s campus and in halls around the city in order to diversify the social and education offerings of the Fellowship.

Religiously, the Boulder Jewish Fellowship retained strong ties to the Hillel at the University of Colorado throughout its early history, as Hillel was the only space in which they had a rabbi to lead worship services.<sup>34</sup> The relationship between Hillel and the Fellowship was both religious and financial. The Fellowship often donated money to the Hillel Foundation for upkeep; in exchange members of the Fellowship could worship at Hillel. There seems to have been a strong sense of gratitude from the Fellowship towards Hillel as well, as they often allocated funds to send flowers to Hillel and to its rabbi for holidays and other milestones.<sup>35</sup>

In 1966, a turning point in the history of Har HaShem took place that had to do with its relationship with Hillel. Members of the growing community were beginning to feel like they were becoming a burden to Hillel and its rabbi and many of them were ready to establish themselves outside of the confines of the Hillel organization. However, the building committee was not yet ready to define itself religiously in 1966, preferring to defer the discussion of synagogue affiliation until a later date, favoring “unity and a vote of confidence” in the

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<sup>34</sup> “Executive Board Meeting.” April 17, 1963. Box 1, folder 8, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>35</sup> “Board Meeting.” September 9, 1963. Box 1, folder 4, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

community for the time being.<sup>36</sup> Defining the religious affiliation of the Fellowship synagogue would fundamentally change the building itself. Small details, such as divided seating areas for men and women, were to be included in building plans, and without adhering to one dogma, such details would be left ambiguous. Their decision was however essentially a financial one; the board was struggling to afford the structure that the community believed it needed to become a congregation. Rather than divide a group that had come together, the board wanted to see the project gain traction before debates about specific features of a structure began.

In 1966, William S. Bach, a founding member of the Fellowship, wrote a lengthy letter to the community discussing the growing Jewish presence in Boulder. Both students at the university and families were in need of a proper synagogue. Somewhere between 1964 and 1966, the Fellowship purchased a plot of land on Baseline Road east of the university's campus.<sup>37</sup> Bach was "ashamed when [he was] asked by [his] gentile friends about the lack of a formal Jewish place of worship." He went on to stress the importance of defining the community and to label the building housing the community a "synagogue," long before a building had even been built. By the letter's conclusion, he makes it clear that the need to build a synagogue is an issue of growing importance in the Fellowship's community.<sup>38</sup> While his letter is the only surviving document specifically regarding the need for a synagogue at this time, it is clear from the

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<sup>36</sup> "General Meeting." March 7, 1966. Box 1, folder 7, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>37</sup> The documents regarding this purchase are not included in the archival material; most of the meeting minutes from 1965 have been lost and all that remains are a treasurer's report (in which the building fund had only \$160-odd dollars) and the meeting minutes of a board meeting in which the building fund was not mentioned. However, the treasurer's report does allude to purchased land, presumably the plot on which the community wished to build its synagogue. (Box 1, folder 6, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.)

<sup>38</sup> "Letter from William S. Bach." No date. Box 1, folder 7, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

meeting minutes and Ad Hoc Committee's reports that there was a general consensus among Fellowship members that the next step in their evolution as a community would be to build a synagogue.

The Flatirons, the most imposing feature of the local landscape, create a natural backdrop to all structures built in Boulder. The Fellowship's synagogue would be no different; Lefebvre discusses absolute spaces as being those spaces that become such because of an inherent natural feature. In such a way, the Flatirons create a natural synagogue. The road further West is blocked by mountains and the plains to the East seem an open trail to Jewish epicenters. A frontier is a wild space in the cultural consciousness of Americans, and Boulder sits on the edge of the frontier. Frontier communities traditionally place liberty as a central value and such an attitude is reflected in their buildings. A synagogue, however, is a space locked to a tradition of its own; by acknowledging Jerusalem and facing eastward, a synagogue is never truly free. Lefebvre sees this as an intersection between absolute and abstract space. Absolute space adheres to a history and to hierarchies that are not controlled by the psychology of the community, while abstract space moves beyond such structures and becomes malleable in the minds of people. The Fellowship's synagogue, then, had to be innovative and acknowledge local values while also remaining faithful to the thousands of years of tradition tying its congregants to their historical origins.

By March 1966, Stanley Goldberg, an architect, had been contracted to design a synagogue for the fast-growing community. His design included a lobby, three classrooms, an office, a mechanical room, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a meeting hall with a moveable *bimah* (a

synagogue altar from where prayer is led).<sup>39</sup> It is difficult to ascertain the motivation for building each of these rooms, but in them one can see the values that the synagogue would uphold. A lobby is the first space one sees upon entering a building. By having a lobby, the synagogue created a welcoming space for not only its own members, but for visitors as well. Classrooms were necessary because of the earlier debates about religious education in schools. The Fellowship had begun organizing classes for its youths, but having its own space in which to teach them was a statement that education was a value for them. The offices were useful and adhered to the secular administration that had long been established. The logistics would be controlled from within the synagogue. The bathroom and mechanical room were practical features of a modern building. The kitchen, though practical, sparked years of debate. The women, showing a newfound independence, lobbied the building committee for a larger kitchen to host events. The kitchen itself would be a battleground over synagogue affiliation, the debate to kosher the kitchen was an item in contention.<sup>40</sup> The building was not simply a worship hall; indeed it was hardly one at all. The *bimah* was not a focal point of the meeting hall, but was rather a moveable fixture that could be moved out of the way for social activities and non-religious events. The flexibility of this design show the complications faced when tying tradition and innovation together. Important synagogue features had to be included, but their place could not be permanent in a malleable community. The features that were not historically traditional to synagogues were included for the sake of modernity. The Fellowship was asserting itself as a central feature of Boulder Jewish life by including such things in its design.

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<sup>39</sup> “General Meeting.” March 7, 1966. Box 1, folder 7, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>40</sup> This debate is not resolved in the archival material, but presumably when Har HaShem decided as a congregation to become Reform, the kitchen was left unkoshered, as is traditional in the Reform community.

Later stages of Goldberg's original design were to include a second story classroom and a grand lobby. The final stage of the project was to build a dedicated sanctuary. Indeed, the first step for the community was to establish a building that was practical and multi-use, rather than to build an opulent monument to their faith. Such utilitarian arguments remained important in the years following the initial groundbreaking of Har HaShem's building. Emphasizing the gendered division of labor of American Judaism, the Sisterhood of the Boulder Jewish Fellowship, a descendant of the original women's group, argued well into 1967 that the planned kitchen was too small for its intended uses. The board gave the Sisterhood agency to discuss plans and make changes with the architect as was needed.<sup>41</sup> Other arguments about space and design soon followed the "kitchen debate," and the building that housed Har HaShem changed over the years.

The nebulous discussions surrounding Har HaShem in its early years encompassed nearly every facet of daily life in 1960s Boulder: public and private education, religious worship, social cohesion, and acceptance in the wider community. On May 13, 1966, the Boulder Jewish Fellowship declared itself a congregation: "it was decided that we are now a Congregation and would be known by that name in the future."<sup>42</sup> Documents dated after May 13<sup>th</sup> refer to the Fellowship as "the Boulder Jewish Congregation," an important symbolic step in establishing a religious community. Things began to move quickly in 1966; the Sunday School interviewed its first professional directors and the congregation began to debate its identity as a religious, rather than a social or activist, community. The building fund had pledges of more than \$17,000 by

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<sup>41</sup> "Board Meeting." January 3, 1967. Box 1, folder 8, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>42</sup> "Congregation Meeting." May 13, 1966. Box 1, folder 7, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.



October 1966, and many more were on their way.<sup>43</sup> Members broke ground for the construction of their synagogue in April 1967, just one year after the catalyst to build was launched. Rabbis from Denver were invited to the ceremony and offer guidance to the new congregation. Considering no specific affiliation had yet been decided, the board was looking to Denver's rabbis for guidance.<sup>44</sup> In American Judaism, the multiple denominations are broken up into different systems of rabbis, synagogues, and administrators and different practices divide the various denominations. Deciding which to adopt would be an important framework for the religious life of Boulder's Jews. In 1967, a Ritual Committee was established to govern the holiday services at for the congregation, typically carried out by congregants with musical talent.<sup>45</sup> It was not until 1974 that discussion of hiring a rabbi began.<sup>46</sup> The synagogue became a place for the Jews of Boulder to celebrate and to worship; in later years the building would grow and become a meeting hall that provided sanctuary for all types of celebrations and services.

The board discussed four names for their synagogue: *Beth-el*, House of God; *Beth Shalom*, House of Peace; *Beth David*, House of David; and *Har HaShem*, Mountain of God. On May 9, 1966, the congregation voted for *Har HaShem*, a fitting name given Har HaShem's mountain backdrop and not unlike other Western communities emerging in the 1960s and 70s

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<sup>43</sup> "Board Meeting." October 4, 1966. Box 1, folder 7, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>44</sup> "Board meeting." April, 1967. Box 1, folder 8, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>45</sup> "Board Meeting." July 11, 1967. Box 1, folder 8, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>46</sup> "Special Board Meeting." December 22, 1974. Box 1, folder 15, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

that emphasized local features of the landscape, like Congregation Sha'ar Zahav (Golden Gate), the predominantly LGBT synagogue founded in San Francisco in 1977.<sup>47</sup>

The community that built Congregation Har HaShem had long understood itself as a feature of the Boulder community; a place where Jews were to come together to improve their own lives and the lives of everyone around them. Even in its name, Har HaShem sought to root itself in the Boulder area, while maintaining a special, Jewish space for worship and community. The building itself represents the process of producing space. For example, when the plans were made to design a kitchen, the question hanging over the congregation was whether it would be kosher. In the early years, it was decided that the kitchen would be kosher, but it no longer is today, as it identifies as a Reform synagogue, a decision that was made in 1972, when it brought its first student rabbis to teach.<sup>48</sup> It retains, however, markings differentiating between milk and meat.

A second example of the production of space can be found in its sanctuary. The sanctuary is large and open, but totally separate from its social hall. In the earliest designs, the social hall and sanctuary were one room, a meeting hall with a mobile *bimah*. That meeting hall had a dual purpose and was meant to serve both abstract and absolute functions. Later, however, congregants built a second hall, one larger than the first, that became the new sanctuary. A permanent *bimah* was built in the new room and the social hall lost its absolute function.<sup>49</sup> The duality of the original space is intersectional. Just as Har HaShem itself had to promote traditional and modern values, so too did the space need to house different values. The

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<sup>47</sup> "Congregation Meeting." May 9, 1967. Box 1, folder 8, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Sara-Jane Cohen

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Sara-Jane Cohen

classrooms still stand and are often filled with students learning about Hebrew and Judaism on the weekends. Building a structure gave the members of Congregation Har HaShem the framework to define themselves as a community; debates regarding who was defined as Jew became important once there were walls that ostensibly created a refuge for those Jews. The 1960s were a period of great change in the world and of political upheaval. Building a synagogue in a western state in such a time was certainly a complicated endeavor. However difficult, the building gave the community motivation to understand itself religiously and socially; such decisions are essentially a production of space.

### **Changing Jewish Communities**

It was during the American Revolution that Jews were first able to partake in the discourse of freedom and became equal citizens to those Christians around them. Jews in this period internalized freedom and equality as values of their own, and this process allowed them to debate, with more clarity, the role of religious practice in their communities. Jewish leaders began to advocate for their communities to the political bodies forming in the United States, as Isaac Harby, a Jewish leader, did in 1816: “Jews are by no means to be considered as a Religious sect, tolerated by the government... [but rather they] constitute a portion of the People. They are, in every respect, woven in and compacted with the citizens of the Republic.”<sup>50</sup> This argument was new: previously Jews had accepted their lot as second-class citizens or a minority group that had to remain quiet to thrive. The American Revolution, and contemporary revolutions in Europe, allowed Jews to feel a new sense of freedom, and with that freedom they felt as though they could redefine themselves. Jews began moving out of the cultural centers that had been set up during the colonies and began to build new synagogues in growing cities.

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<sup>50</sup> Stiefel 154.

The six earliest synagogues in America were all congregations made of Sephardic Jews, those who could trace their cultural origins to the Iberian Peninsula. These congregations existed in the colonial era and seem to have encompassed the majority of Jewish life, including social functions as well as religious.<sup>51</sup> However, in the late eighteenth century, Ashkenazi Jews began to migrate to North America, and once they arrived, the monopoly on Judaism once held by the Sephardic was no more. They brought new customs and different practices with them, though at first they joined the preexisting Sephardic communities. These Jews were dissatisfied with Sephardic practice, however, and once their population began growing, they seem to have built new synagogues and created new centers of Judaism. Synagogues in Europe had been central and essentially had a one-to-one ratio with the towns in which they were built; there was no choice in practice for European Jews. However, with the interactions between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews growing increasingly tense, communities in America began to break in two and form new synagogues with different sets of practices. This splitting was innovative of American Jews; in European Judaism, congregants had very little control over the practices of their rabbis and very little choice in where they went for spiritual guidance.<sup>52</sup> This splitting eventually led to the formation of distinct sects within the Jewish population, the largest of which were the Orthodox, the Conservative, and the Reform movements. This ideological shift was important for the Jews who participated in it, fundamentally changing the appearance of their services.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Marc Lee Raphael, *The Synagogue in America: A Short History*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>52</sup> Leon A. Jick "The Reform Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed Jack Wertheimer, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 87.

<sup>53</sup> One citizen described the process in 1895: "[the Reform] Jews believe in being comfortable when they worship. In place of shutting off women and children in a latticed balcony, they want them in their pews. In place of keeping on their hats, in church, they see no problem in removing them. In place of a male choir and no instrument accompaniment, they think an organ and good mixed choir would add to the services. Then they want hymns or sermons in English... the

Reform Jews in particular began breaking with tradition, moving away from difficult, lengthy ceremonies and moving to a more inclusive view of Judaism. Jews in the Reform movement were being “Protestantized,” no doubt because of influence from the Second Great Awakening, a reemergence of Christian faith in nineteenth century America.<sup>54</sup> Jews began to worship in English and identify with their country, rather than isolating themselves within the smaller Jewish world. This process was not limited to the East Coast, of course, but rather took Jews across the country and allowed them to identify with the Christian movements happening at the same time as their movements.

The synagogue as both a community center and religious center is arguably innovative in American Judaism. Some scholars argue that the multifaceted function of synagogues developed in ancient times, after the temples had fallen and when Judaism was developing itself as a Rabbinic tradition.<sup>55</sup> This understanding, however, limits the possibility of what a Jewish community center might be; in ancient times, Jews lived in cities that were far more communal than the ones that have developed in the modern world, and such “synagogues” were simply a central feature of a small town. Early synagogues, and indeed the synagogues of the early modern period, often evoked the temple. Many traditional features one identifies with a sanctuary today (namely, an ark housing the Torah scrolls, a Jerusalem-facing sanctuary, and curtains separating areas within the synagogue) are interpretations of the Second Temple, rather than innovations of a new style of Judaism.<sup>56</sup> Sephardic Jews built the first temples in the New World, in Brazil following emigration from the Netherlands. Such synagogues were structurally

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Orthodox which has numbers but not so many ducats, adheres to wearing hats, the isolation of women and children, the use of Hebrew in services, and the banishment of music.” (Raphael 21)

<sup>54</sup> Jick 92

<sup>55</sup> Stiefel 11.

<sup>56</sup> Stiefel 13.

similar to those found in Europe at the time, and not much innovation changed them in the first two hundred years of their existence. It was not until 1824 that synagogues began expanding across the country with force. 1824 marked the year that Ashkenazi immigrants, as well as American-born Ashkenazi Jews, began building new structures for themselves. They called these buildings “temples,” rather than “synagogues,” marking a theological and rhetorical shift in Jewish discourse.<sup>57</sup> This shift is important; not only did it reflect the emerging splinters of Jewish practice in America, but also it displayed the nuanced understanding of the wider political landscape that Jews had. They wanted to identify themselves with the majority population of the United States, but they also valued their heritage.

Reform Jewish synagogues took on a Classical shape that was common among monumental American buildings. The connection between “temple” and democracy was not left to words, but rather took to the shape of their buildings as well. Jews, especially Reform Jews, wished to connect their identities as Americans to their identities as Jews. By building synagogues structurally influenced by classical temples in Rome and Greece, the Jews thought they could symbolically represent their adherence to democracy through architecture. This classical style in and of itself was an expression of Jewish freedom in America; in Europe, Jews

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<sup>57</sup> Stiefel writes, “the Reform use of the word “temple” instead of “synagogue” reflected a theological movement, evolutionary rather than revolutionary, away from traditional Jewish belief in a future messianic reign—the dogma that had animated Jews, not the least the Sephardim of the Atlantic World, for smuch of their history. Certainly “temple” was an innovative compound signifier. The term conspicuously denotes the ancient Temple of the Hebrew Buble but inevitably implies acceptance of a broader cultural, historical, and political reference, one associated with the ascendant republican mythos that grew out of the twin democratic revolutions in Europe and America. “Temple” in this second sense connote Periclean Athens and republican Rome as key referents in a contemporary, politicized symbolic vocabulary.” (180)

had been limited by the government in their design choices.<sup>58</sup> Synagogues built in 1893 and later adhered to a new idea of style; the Chicago World's Fair had taken place and given the world a new conceptual framework in which to build cities. The "City Beautiful Movement," inspired by the Fair, pushed architects to blend beautiful architecture with functionality in urban design. American synagogue designers, too, were inspired by the classical features displayed at the World Fair. In an effort to both adhere to the trends of the modern world and to finally express a creativity long stifled in Europe, Jewish architects took advantage of the City Beautiful Movement and designed opulent buildings for their worship. This innovation was superficial, however. Despite building new outward facing monuments to Judaism, the interior of these synagogues remained much the same as they had before the World's Fair.<sup>59</sup> This classical style is metaphorical and practical; Jews could worship in these buildings but they also represented a new era for American Jews.

As Jews moved West, a new lack of cohesion intensified; not only were Jews pushing to identify themselves through religion, but they were actively engaged with building the newest cities of the United States. Synagogues in Portland felt pressure to find an identity, be it Orthodox or Reform, and Jews had to define themselves in the wider world.<sup>60</sup> In Texas, Jews traveled west with the rest of the population, but often found themselves trying to find a place in the community. They adopted a European history for themselves and bought into the Manifest

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<sup>58</sup> Gruber writes, "Classicism was not a style imposed upon Jewish congregations by Christian architects, as had been the case with the creation and adoption of the Moorish style synagogues in Central Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. In Europe, emancipated Jewish communities had been pressured by governing authorities to build large and prominently situated synagogues, but in styles, such as the Moorish, that would not cause confusion." (70)

<sup>59</sup> Gruber 87

<sup>60</sup> Raphael 32.

Destiny rhetoric that was central to pioneer ideology.<sup>61</sup> Such adaptation allowed the Jews to survive in these burgeoning communities, but also challenged them to define themselves in a spiritual way. Jews could no longer fill the role of “Jew” in the West; they had to follow a doctrine that would both allow them to maintain a connection to more established communities and to evolve into frontier communities in their own right. There were far fewer Jews in frontier territories than there had been in cities, and given the wide space open for settling, those Jews were not as close together as they had once been. Such constraints made it difficult for religious authority to be imposed as strictly as it had been on the Eastern Seaboard, and frontier Jews gravitated towards more cultural opportunities, rather than purely religious ones. Jews in the west, too, were isolated from larger Diaspora communities in New York City and elsewhere; in a sense, they were peripheral. These factors imposed on Jews in the west led them to march forward in redefining themselves as something unique; not simply a peripheral community in a peripheral country far from Jerusalem, but rather a new and innovative brand of Judaism that took into account the best ideologies of the west.<sup>62</sup> Such innovation was, because of the differences that had split Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews in the east, not impossible. While immigrant Jews from Europe still found American Judaism to be shocking and often times remained in traditional communities. However, over time, communities reformed and became something new, though the lack of ideological framework allowed reforms to come as they were needed for each community.<sup>63</sup> This framework persisted beyond the nineteenth century, as more

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<sup>61</sup> Bryan Edward Stone, *Chosen Folk: Jews on the Frontier of Texas*, (Austin, TX: the University of Texas Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>63</sup> Jick 90.



and more political freedom was being given to minority populations and Jews began to feel confident in voicing opinions.

In the West, Jews were able to redefine themselves more openly and clearly than they had previously in the east. Reform Jews were the most likely to take on a journey westward, and with that journey they brought the progressive values of the Reform Jewish movement. Rabbis were not a population who traveled west very often, and most new western synagogues did not employ a trained spiritual leader in their early years.<sup>64</sup> Synagogues became meeting places for young Jews who replaced the rabbinic role in a more informal way, Jews came together to worship and to find solace in a harsh environment.

The West, however, was not settled without problems. Jews had long been considered the “outsiders” in mainstream eastern cities, seen as scapegoats and crooks. In the West, Jews were able to assert themselves as part of the majority population precisely because all Euro-Americans, Jews included, were newcomers to the land. By emphasizing their European heritage and adopting an Anglo-centric worldview, Jews in frontier towns also adopted Manifest Destiny as their own ideology. In doing so, especially during the nineteenth century, Jews looked to the American Indian populations as the outsiders and subjugated them to cruel treatment, not unlike their Christian contemporaries.<sup>65</sup> Some Jews, however, resisted this open hostility while reaping the rewards of making the native populations an other. These people did not identify as conquerors of virgin earth or populations, but rather as humanitarians sent to advocate for groups that could not advocate for themselves. By the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese immigrant

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<sup>64</sup> Toll, William. “Pioneering: Jewish Men and Women of the American West,” in *Creating American Jews*, ed. Margo Bloom, (Hanover, NH: the University Press of New England, 1998), 30.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid* 29.

populations had become the largest target of racism in the west and Jews took up the mantle of protecting their homes and their economic prospects. This practice was naturally primarily for the benefit of the Jewish settlers, rather than the Chinese immigrants, for by focusing on another group, the Jews felt as though they could combat anti-Semitism in a covert way, without drawing attention to themselves as a minority population.<sup>66</sup> Such a tactic is morally ambiguous, but it highlights the motives of Jews in the West: to identify themselves as Americans and settlers before Jews, to become insiders in a population where they had previously been outsiders, and to do so without breaking with a religious memory of persecution.

Following the lead of Protestant missionaries, Jews began to do philanthropic things for their communities, such as building hospitals and orphanages. These structures, however, were not connected to synagogue buildings at all.<sup>67</sup> Synagogues remained simply religious, and at most educational, for a long time. However, while Jews in the east had long identified with Protestant revolutions and modernization in the east, the west offered them an opportunity to openly imitate the charitable acts being done by Christians. In most cities in the east, hospitals and orphanages had long since been established by secular or Christian organizations, and within the confines of the urban sphere, Jews did not feel comfortable advertising their religion through such foundations. In the West, where the minority focus was shifted to American Indians and where Jews were able to assert their white “Anglo-identity,” they felt comfortable building monuments not only to their religion, but those that would help the community around them. Frontier Jews felt a new sense of space in the West; precisely because there were indigenous

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid 29.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid 31.

inhabitants, who needed to be subjugated. It was there that they were able to formulate an identity without fear of retribution.

The frontier is psychologically quite distinct from established cityscapes in the east. Open territory on the frontier operates in an entirely different mode than do cities, especially cities long established. On the frontier, one must make sense of the natural space in which he or she is acting and then transform that space into something livable. Cities in the east have complicated systems of relationships and have already become abstract space. They no longer force people to forge a new identity. Frontiers are undefined in the general consciousness and need to be made into something more tangible for humans to inhabit them; “a frontier, in its widest sense, involves an interaction between different groups of people that requires them to define themselves in relation to one another. A frontier need not be a physical or geographical place, but rather a set of ideas that gives meaning to physical reality.”<sup>68</sup> Those relationships are essential to building a space. In the case of a religious space, the community whose relationships are in question come together because of a common belief, but inherently that belief is in opposition to those people outside of their community living in the same space. This complex web of relationships and interactions is what brings a space from its natural state to an absolute one. By imposing political, social, and religious definitions on what was once an expanse of land, people reimagine the world in which they live. Conflict naturally arises, because people have different understandings of how space should be produced, and often a community comes together in a patchwork way, rather than contiguously. Jews operate both within the larger frame of the geographical community, as well as within their own communities. In such a way, these layers add depth to the community and create even more conflict.

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<sup>68</sup> Stone 3.

The Jewish voice in the community was one that developed despite hundreds of years of building a defense against anti-Semitism. Before 1900, Jews had confined themselves to the periphery of communities, trying to create a modern identity for themselves, but continuing to blend in for the sake of safety. World War II marked a seminal moment in Jewish political and social discourse. The Holocaust was a traumatic moment in the collective memory of the Jews, and one that was the impetus for change. The Jews had not come together as a voting block or as a force in politics before the 1930s, and while they had been ardent supporters of Franklin D. Roosevelt, they did not have any influence over policy. It was when knowledge of the concentration camps became public that Jews in America became anti-German and lobbied for the punishment of Nazi officials and for post-war reparations because of their crimes.<sup>69</sup> Some Jews even went so far as to push the administration to allow them to handle West Germany's reform and government after the war. This, however, was far from the mainstream reaction of Jews after the Second World War.<sup>70</sup> Most Jews were openly pro-Israel and anti-Germany following the war, but especially among Reform communities, Jews took a moderate view of the reparations they should expect from the Germans. Jews in general began to organize themselves into political groups, including the American Jewish Community, an "elitist" organization advocating on behalf of Jews; the Jewish War Veterans, a group founded following World War II to advocate for soldiers; and the World Jewish Congress, a Zionist organization. This conflation of politics and religion was not unheard of in Jewish culture before World War II, but the impact that the war had on the general conscience of the Jews was clear: they would be

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<sup>69</sup> Shlomo Shafir, "From Negation to First Dialogues: American Jewry and Germany in the First Postwar Decades," in *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945-1968, volume 1*, ed. Detlef Junker, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 550.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid 551.

heard. The most famous of all organizations that lobbied on behalf of the Jews, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (known today simply as the ADL), was founded to protect Jews in a world where they experienced much hate, and following World War II, it too argued on behalf of Jews and the six million lost to the Third Reich. By the 1960s, the ADL was advocating on more philosophical grounds, still lobbying for Jews, but looking towards the future rather than dwelling on the past.<sup>71</sup> These lobby groups and advocates for the Jewish people, though not synagogues or communities in the traditional sense, gave Jews a voice in politics and added a new layer to their identities. They began to articulate secular values in a Jewish context and began to see themselves less as victims and more as agents of change.

The early twentieth century was a period marked by rapid progress and economic growth. Despite the ideological progress made since 1776, much of American Jewish life had only just formulated itself by the twentieth century. Jews had come from a place where they had to blend in with the general population, sometimes practice their religion in secret, and faced civic limitation because of their Jewish identity. America offered them legal freedom to practice Judaism, though social freedom was slower to come. The first two hundred years of Jewish history in America was a foundation in which Jews struggled to define themselves publically. No longer did they have to exist entirely outside of secular society or blend into it so well that they lost their Jewish identity, but rather they were able to articulate themselves as a political and social force for the first time. This had long since taken the form of philanthropic efforts, especially in the west, and was beginning to show itself politically with the formation of Jewish lobbying and advocacy groups. Jews themselves were finding identify in their shared European

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid 558.

heritage with Christians and other residents of the United States, and were splintering into smaller factions based on personal religious identity.

The 1920s were a period of marked growth for Jewish centers. Rabbis and secular leaders were beginning to notice the difficulties in “communal life” for Jews in America and sought to remedy the problems they observed. Kansas City’s Rabbi Henry Berkowitz was a pioneer in this regard; his congregation had many auxiliary groups that covered educational, social, and political issues that they faced, but all of these groups were *auxiliary*. There was no centralization or continuity for them. His goal was to create an amalgamation of these various groups, include rabbinic or spiritual guidance, and house the new society under one roof.<sup>72</sup> His goal was to improve the spiritual life of his congregation by creating a better system under which people could fulfill other aspects of their communal life. In doing this, he conceptualized of a new space in Judaism, an “open temple.” This was to be a place that was not simply open for worship services, but rather a place where people could experience all facets of Judaism and use their space for projects beyond prayer.<sup>73</sup> His goals were not achieved in his time, his project began in 1888, but rather took decades to catch fire in the population. Temples began expanding what was contained within their walls after Berkowitz’s movement gained traction; for example, a synagogue in Ohio became the first to build a gymnasium in 1901.<sup>74</sup> These slow changes picked up speed as the twentieth century wore on, and the movement for “open temples” consolidated

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<sup>72</sup> David Kaufmann, *Shul with a Pool: The “synagogue-center” in American Jewish History*, (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press (the University of New England Press), 1999), 28.

<sup>73</sup> Berkowitz writes “To make the congregational life a part of the people’s life is to be out aim. The temple should stand open continually, i.e. some useful, uplifting influence should come from it day after day. We should strive to create opportunities for each individual in our community to participate actively in some one department at least, of the congregation’s purpose. Each one must feel that he is serving Judaism by helping, however humbly, to conserve the religious, moral, educational, or charitable life of the community.” (Kaufmann 30)

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid* 39.

after Berkowitz's death. This early trembling of social change within the synagogue would prove to be an unstoppable force once education became a priority for the members and those members found a voice to articulate their desires.

The turn of the century also saw a unique moment in Jewish demographics: the first wave of immigrants from Europe were having children who were growing old enough to voice their own opinions. This conflict itself transformed the synagogue.<sup>75</sup> As parents were trying to redefine themselves as Americans, their children were feeling a spiritual hole where their parents had left them uneducated in tradition. Synagogues were founded by these Americanized, immigrant parents and then shaped by these children desiring religion; as the parents lost interest in reforming their own "immigrant shuls," the children would be drawn in by, and impose upon the congregation, new, modern features. Such features included social clubs, Sunday schools, and libraries. Reformers took "stale" ideas and transformed them; services that had been catered to the older generations were reimaged for younger, American-born Jews. Some congregations emulated neighboring churches with the goal of making the synagogue "the center of all neighborhood activities."<sup>76</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The synagogue-center is a uniquely American feature of Judaism. First appearing in the early twentieth-century as a way to include Americanized Jews in religious life, the synagogue-center took on a life of its own as splintered sects of Jews developed their own traditions and

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<sup>75</sup> "In the early decades of the century, immigrant fathers themselves began to Americanize, and many of their sons would seek a path back to Judaism at the same time. Jewish women, who tended to neither extreme in the first place, would enter the sphere of the synagogue in force." That path sought by young men, however, was not the same tradition their fathers had learned. (Ibid 164)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid 165.

different rules surrounding their communities. These centers, however, were the product of nearly one hundred years of American innovation. Jews who had come to America seeking diversity and freedom put down roots where others had already settled; cities on the East Coast established synagogues for worship early on in America's history. As these communities grew demographically and geographically, differences appeared between congregants. These differences would prove fruitful for community innovation in America. Jews were able, for the first time, to create synagogues tailored to the experience they wanted to have during worship. German Jews built synagogues that were distinct from the earlier Sephardic communities, and then the children of these various populations began influencing their communities when they came of age.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of space cannot be easily summarized. However, important pieces of his work have played into the language of this project. His distinctions between natural, absolute, and abstract space have defined the difference between, for instance, a frontier and a city. Natural space codes nicely to frontier, because natural space essentially means a space untouched and unchanged by human contact. That is what the pioneers in the American West saw before them: "virgin soil," a territory they could shape to their own desires. Absolute space is inherently religious and political; churches often found places on which to build because of the surrounding natural features. Cities are often built on rivers and the coast, where people are able to travel easily and engage in commerce. Synagogues often came late to cities and communities and were unable to change absolute space.<sup>77</sup> On the frontiers, however, some Jews traveled simultaneously with their Christian counterparts. This allowed them to take space that had been

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<sup>77</sup> Indeed, even the label "absolute space" has an air of finality to it; an absolute thing is unchanging.



unchanged (from a Eurocentric perspective) and turn it into something familiar, but not the same as what they had known in the East and in Europe. Though Manifest Destiny is an entirely problematic doctrine of belief, when East Coast pioneers first saw the natural splendor of the Western United States, with the imposing mountain backdrops and huge plains, they probably perceived it as natural space. The natural progression in human society, then, was to transform that space, to produce something useful, and to settle there. Communities of white settlers began to spring up, and Jews rebranded themselves as people Anglo-origin, rather than as an “other” in the larger society. In doing so, they had to take on new identifying features that previously had been restricted. Jews had not been allowed to build monumental structures in Europe, and even on the East Coast much of their innovation was to fit into a democratic society, rather than to set themselves apart as a special minority. The frontier offered Jews a new level of creativity; they could build their structures in any shape they desired and they could change the context of their worship more easily.

Absolute space is defined by its imposing, authoritarian rule over a group of people. Populations of Jews had always been minor players in established absolute spaces across the Eastern United States. Synagogues had fit into larger cities, the appearance of them had to pay homage to the Greek and Roman heritage of democracy, despite the complicated relationship Jews had themselves to those groups.<sup>78</sup> This production of space was thus limited; Jews could not create an entirely new identity in the established areas of the United States, but they had few other options. Absolute space, however, restricted innovation in the synagogue to small, metaphorical developments. Jews were able to relax their worship and have more freedom of

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<sup>78</sup> The first temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylonians in 587 BCE, following which the Jews lived under Greek rule for a number of decades. The second temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70CE, traditionally the beginning of the Jewish diaspora.

choice in which synagogue to attend, but they still faced anti-Semitism from their neighbors and a desire to Americanize, rather than retain their Jewish heritage. Further development was first begun once Americans began to colonize the West. Jews went to the frontiers and redefined what they understood to be natural space. In doing such work, they were producing from scratch, rather than reproducing what the structures around them decided was acceptable. In such a way, the Jews of the West were almost producing abstract space,

Abstract space is the continuation of the evolving production of space, according to Lefebvre. Abstract space is far more complicated than either absolute or natural space to define, and he mostly describes it as being the “negation” of absolute space. What he means, however, could be summarized as abstract space being absolute space where the religious and political superstructures have been removed. While this does not totally encompass the weight Lefebvre places behind abstract space, it suffices for the purposes of this paper. Abstract space does not totally encompass and replace absolute space. Synagogues can be understood as pockets of absolute space living in a larger abstract space, but even those pockets are influenced by the abstractions around them. Space is understood through history, and space thus changes over time. Because of this, different aspects of a space will change or remain depending on the people who use that space’s perception of utility. Abstract space enters into the human consciousness when people are able to separate themselves from power structures that had previously defined their lives. For instance, for Jews this was when monarchies and other European governments stopped being able to define where and how they worshiped. Critically, this moment of evolution from absolute to abstract space creates a tension in the remaining absolute spaces. They are railing against a devolution of power structures that had informed them for centuries, but they are stuck within those very structures that built them. Jews were able to reimagine the appearances

of their synagogues in America, but they remained within a familiar structure: Greco-Roman temples. This familiarity is an adherence to western power dynamics, in this case democracy, while also pushing out of previously defined boundaries. Those boundaries would continue to be pushed, especially in the context of the United States.

In the nineteenth-century, Jews experienced a new sense of freedom in America, finally feeling free to build synagogues that represented universal values and displayed prominence within society. In Europe, they had been restricted civically and architecturally. In America, despite anti-Semitism, fewer laws or structures existed to limit their expression and these laws were universal and did not target the Jews specifically. This allowed them to build the aforementioned Grecian-inspired structures. These buildings were large and imposing, prominently displaying synagogues as central buildings. They contributed to cities' overall beauty and put Jews, for the first time, in an influential-looking position. Jews used these spaces primarily for worship; in the nineteenth-century they did not yet have a conception of the "synagogue-center," but rather understood synagogues as temples, houses of worship. As immigrant Jews Americanized, they lost their old instinct for tradition. Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews lived in the same cities, meaning they either had to learn one another's customs or build multiple synagogues within one geographic space. This practice was unusual in Europe, most smaller towns would have a single rabbi and a single, unassuming synagogue. Jews born in America were able to decide for themselves how they wished to practice Judaism. They could decide if they would remain in a tradition their parents handed to them, or they were, for the first time, able to break off from those traditional communities and reimagine Jewish life for themselves. This ability is rooted in the structure: when strict European laws prevented Jews from building specialty buildings and worshiping freely, Jews remained largely insular and felt

unable to practice Judaism as they might have wished. They could not expand their practices because they were not allowed to build structures that went beyond utility. Jews often remained oppressed and underprivileged in Europe; they were unable to flex their identities openly. In America, however, Jews no longer felt those shackles. American values, such as freedom of religion and freedom of speech, allowed Jews to become proud and experimental in their worship, starting in their spaces.

The twentieth-century saw an even greater expansion of American Jewish identity. Many immigrants continued to flock to the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth-century, but there was a growing population of American-born Jews who had a plurality of thought on the matter of worship. Citizens and immigrants had expanded westward in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, following the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the promise of wealth. Jews prospered in this environment; they redefined themselves as members of the Anglo-origin communities, rather than outsiders in a Christian community. They took advantage of indigenous groups to both display philanthropic efforts to westernize the American Indians and to show, by comparison, that they themselves were Europeans too. This practice benefitted the Jewish populations of western America, but it certainly did not aid the indigenous populations. Despite the suffering they caused to American Indians, Jews were able to experience even more freedom in the west. As Lefebvre would argue, they came upon natural space and reimagined it into absolute space for themselves. New traditions certainly held value in the minds of pioneer Jews, but they were not restricted to the Democratic Jew narrative they had crafted for themselves in East Coast cities. One can see temples built in western cities that mimic the Greco-Roman tradition, but one can also see new styles of synagogues. Many look much like the cities

built around them; some even appear to be designed after pueblo buildings.<sup>79</sup> Red bricks carved from the red stones around them became common in construction, as did lower buildings that allowed visitors to see the wide plains and imposing mountains that set the stage for the Western United States. Naturally, these synagogues developed alongside the cities, and thus the transition from natural space to absolute space took place in a wider context than simply the religious one afforded to the Jews in the West. The middle of the twentieth-century marked a rejection of traditional power structures and political roles. People began to speak out against gender norms, violence, and racism. This breakdown of tradition is the moment of the formation of abstract space. Jews partook in this breakdown as well; they rejected socio-political norms and rebuilt themselves in a modern image.

Congregation Har HaShem is a culmination of many different factors in the history of American Judaism. It is the first synagogue in Boulder, Colorado, a frontier town that grew dramatically in the first half of the twentieth century, and it is a community that struggled to define itself against the majority population. Jews had lived in Boulder far longer than Har HaShem had been a synagogue; students at the university had already established chapters of Jewish fraternities and sororities and there was a university Hillel group. However, no central community existed for those Jews in Boulder who were not connected to the University of Colorado. Thus, in 1960, when a number of families came together to found a community of Jews for social events and for worship, they were perhaps behind parallel communities elsewhere in the West. Boulder was not a large city in the 1960s, only 20,000 residents were marked by census in the 1950.<sup>80</sup> It is unclear how many of these residents were Jews, but it is unlikely that

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<sup>79</sup> No author. "History of the CPJHC." *Arizona Jewish Historical Society*, 2008.

<sup>80</sup> No author. "Building Height Restrictions," *Boulder County Land Use Department Publications*, 2012.

the number was very large. The narrative of Democratic Jew and Jew-of-Anglo-origin had long since taken hold in most communities by the mid-century, but Jews continued to feel a need to remain a community. Being Jewish was especially important to families living in Boulder, it seems, because the town was set against a wide prairie, giving the impression that there was distance between them and their families elsewhere. Some founders of Har HaShem had grown up in areas where shipping kosher meat had taken days and was quite expensive.<sup>81</sup> All members saw a burgeoning community without spiritual direction. Jewish children were being taught Christian holidays in school, Jews were joining social clubs where they were surrounded by people who believed different things than them, and Jews could not find spiritual fulfillment within Hillel and the University resources. While integrating themselves into the larger community was certainly valuable for the Jews who later founded Har HaShem, they felt an urgent need to maintain a steadfast Jewish identity. These members saw the natural space that still remained and the emerging absolute space being built by their neighbors and felt a need to imprint themselves on the space.

The building itself is an unimposing structure. It sits against the backdrop of the mountains and in the earliest photographs of Congregation Har HaShem, one can see the wide openness that surrounds the building. It was built by its congregants, many photographs survive that show children and their mothers laying bricks for the original building.<sup>82</sup> This structure was a space designed for multiple uses; arguments about kitchens and libraries haunt the earliest records of the Boulder Hebrew Alliance, and such arguments survived well beyond the construction of the synagogue. The building itself was built in commemoration of the frontier

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with Sara-Jane Cohen

<sup>82</sup> Photograph. No date. Box 2, folder 1, Congregation Har HaShem archives. Boulder, Colorado.

community building it; it looked much like the buildings that surrounded it, adopting a mid-century modern appearance, but it stood tall in an empty field. Its major sanctuary hall mimicked the appearance of Noah's Ark, perhaps a nod to the founding of a new community in a fresh environment. People walking by would not be able to ignore Congregation Har HaShem's building; the people who built it were proud of their work. A sort of grassroots campaign encouraged a member who was an architect to design the project, Jewish labor was used wherever possible, and the building itself was built by the hands of the people who wanted it most. These features of Har HaShem set it apart from its earlier East Coast peers. Though the stately temples were designed to make clear that Jews bought into democracy, they were not built by the children who were to learn in their walls. They were not designed to reflect the people working for their existence, but rather to pay homage to a distant and foreign past. Jews in the American West had a history of their own to draw upon; they felt no pressure to identify with democratic principles, but rather they wanted to assume a position of authority in the community.

Har HaShem, or as it was known before it defined itself spiritually, the Boulder Jewish Fellowship, claimed advocacy rights early in its existence. It fought to secularize the public schools of Boulder County, arguing that students who were not Protestant Christians might feel ostracized by the lessons. They held study groups and communed with synagogues in Denver to create a place where they could learn about their past, no matter how geographically remote it was. The Boulder Jewish Fellowship had, before the construction of its synagogue, fought for its right to be the center of Jewish life in Boulder. Indeed, once its building was built, it only became more central to the process of advocacy and empathy for Boulder Jews. Having a space in which to teach classes, both to children and to adults, allowed the Jews of Har HaShem to

assert independence from Chabad, Hillel, Jewish Community Centers, and other organizations that also vied for salience in mid-century Boulder.

Congregation Har HaShem, though it had held worship services for the High Holidays, had not given itself a spiritual identity in its pre-structural days. Having a space, one built by the community, allowed the members of Har HaShem to debate the merits of defining themselves by the rules of one denomination of Judaism. In the end, the Reform Movement came out victorious in the spiritual realm of Har HaShem, but that battle was not easily won. Like earlier distinctions made elsewhere in the United States, a plurality of voices constituted the body of membership at Har HaShem. Different groups had different goals in mind; young parents wanted their children to be educated as Jews and older members wanted to continue a spiritual tradition with which they had grown up. Each felt that they had a voice to share because the construction of their synagogue had been such a personal journey. Many families made financial sacrifices to fund the synagogue and many others donated their time and energy into constructing it. This connection to the building gave the space, however absolute in its religious definition, an indescribably personal sense. Lefebvre does not discuss emotional space much in his work; the humans whom he describes operate subconsciously and almost like machines. However, those people who built Har HaShem were not robotic; they felt passionate about their synagogue and wanted to be heard. This is evident in the many late-night debates held at the homes of various presidents. People would not submit and many decisions were initially left non-final so that changes could be made if better arguments were later articulated. Even the building itself was planned in multiple stages; rooms were designed to be convertible and fluid, so as to not restrict the congregants to any particular structure. Hiring a rabbi, deciding which denomination to ascribe to, even naming the synagogue were emotionally spiritual decisions for the congregants.



“Har HaShem” can be translated approximately as “Mountain of the Name.” In Hebrew, this really means “Mountain of God.” This name, as was explained above, was one of a few finalists in the running for renaming the Boulder Jewish Fellowship once it had constructed a synagogue in which to worship. This choice, on the surface, seems obvious. Har HaShem was built on the toes of a large mountain range and was a house of God. However, the deeper relationship between the natural space which had defined Colorado for so long and the absolute space that was produced in the synagogue itself creates a much deeper connection between the name and the geography. A synagogue trying to remain connected to its peers in the East would face towards Jerusalem, forever reminding its congregants of the ultimate goal, returning to the promised land. The environment surrounding Har HaShem almost *forced* its builders to construct an east-facing synagogue. The eponymous mountains create a wall to the west that seemingly prevents travel. To the east, the flatter plains of the midlands create an easy route for people to travel, and over which one can look almost to the eastern United States. The meeting of these two geographical features, the mountains and the plains, create space that is unlike anything anywhere else in the country. While elsewhere there are certainly imposing mountains and flat plains, this point of contact is dramatic in Boulder. The Flatirons mountains are jut from the ground almost directly skywards, creating the impression that one would have to climb directly up their flat rock faces to overcome them. This reinforces the Jewish ideal of travelling east to Jerusalem by almost making it impossible for them to travel west.

Indeed, there are two doctrines at odds with one another in frontier Jewish communities; Americans wished to move west to expand their territory and make America stretch from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Jews wished to return to Jerusalem, a city in the opposite direction of frontier travel paths. As Jews moved further and further from their religious goals, they had to

create new, more secular goals to maintain cohesion in their communities. Many variables had to be factored into these changes. Jews were considered outsiders by the majority groups that often surrounded them and much of the innovation in America was based on adhering to American virtues and fitting into the wider culture. Even more dramatically, in the West, Jews felt the freedom of the open spaces and alien natural features; it was in the West that Jews began to explore beyond reaffirming American values in their own communities. This is true of both the synagogues and the communities that existed in the frontier. Their buildings changed shape and became more experimental in design, sometimes utilitarian and sometimes opulent. The interior of these buildings became more variable as well; Jews began educating their children in the synagogue structure, requiring classrooms and libraries for learning. Synagogues became a central feature of Jewish life; on the frontier, people were spread apart and perhaps only came together once a week. The synagogue thus became a meeting place, a house not only of worship but of celebration and comradeship. These features were certainly innovative for a religion that had millennia-old traditions.

Congregation Har HaShem itself exemplifies the messy process that produced synagogue-spaces in the American West. It was a community made of a self-selected set of Jews in Boulder, Colorado in 1960. There is no mention in the documents of origin or ethnicity of these Jews. Presumably, they were all of Ashkenazi heritage, but regardless, the first goal of the Boulder Jewish Fellowship was to create an organization for Jews of all backgrounds. The splintering that had occurred in the East had not yet happened to Western synagogues. The Fellowship began not as a synagogue, but as a community center of sorts, holding celebrations and social events for its members, though it always remembered its responsibility to the Jewish religion. It was only upon finding the money to build a synagogue that the Fellowship decided to

rename itself a congregation. This moment is important; what was an amorphous community group suddenly had structure. No longer would they meet in people's homes or church basements, but rather they would have a place for themselves. This independence was important for Har HaShem, they could not produce their own community without their own space. These elements are inherently linked together; community cannot grow without space and space cannot be produced without a community behind it. Even more, the duality of tradition and innovation could not happen until space and community had come together to produce a synagogue. Har HaShem is a Reform congregation, but that decision was not made in the moment of its conception, but rather it was almost ignored until the congregation had established itself in Boulder. Like the Fellowship's original mission, the primary goal of Har HaShem was to create a nondenominational Jewish community. It was built at a time when innovation was finally coming into vogue for American Jews. The synagogue itself did not look like a Greco-Roman temple from the East, nor did it blend into the background of Boulder. Rather, it stood out, alone, against the mountains. Such a building could not have been constructed in historical communities, but it relied on the smaller steps they had taken to create beautiful structures for Jewish worship. Tradition remained important to Har HaShem, because tradition is what holds Jewish communities together across geographic space. Despite differences in practice, Jews all remember a common history and a collective goal of returning to a homeland. This adherence to tradition gave Har HaShem another dimension; it could innovate within boundaries established before it.

This relationship between innovation and tradition is likely not unique to the Jewish experience, but frontier Jews prospered especially because of their ability to innovate while adhering to tradition well. Jewish communities needed to adapt to changing political and social

climates, but they needed to maintain a relationship to their history. In America, where the rules changed for Jews dramatically, their ability to innovate and observe the world around them served to allow them to change rapidly. This rapid change precipitated a newfound need to have tradition, however. As peripheral communities, they looked to tradition to lock them to their peers overseas. As the geographic space widened, a need for Jewish community grew.

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