

The Story of Chairscape

When the decision was made to rebuild the synagogue in 1986, the LJS Women's Society decided they wanted to be personally associated with a very specific gift with which to beautify our new place of worship. It was Ruth Ive who put forward the idea of following a long-established tradition among Jewish women to utilise the skill in embroidery recorded by Josephus in Second Temple times, attested in references found in the Cairo Geniza and in examples found in synagogues down the centuries.

The Women's Society wished to involve as many members as possible. And so it was that the project, known as Chairscape, crystallised, and a set of eight covers for the eight new bimah chairs was to be created. Chairscape came to glorious fruition when the eight chairs were completed, upholstered and installed in September 1992.

Each chair has a finely curved back and single broad supportive wooden arm, with delicately grooved edging to emulate an open-leaved book. The chairs represent the knowledgeable leaders of the community – exemplary teachers to be respected.

Rachel Caro joined the small Executive Committee, and she introduced Diana Springall, a renowned professional embroiderer, who advised throughout the project.

Once the form had been decided, Jane Finestone was invited to produce a design. Jane took her inspiration from three sources: the perpetual cycle of the Jewish year; the varied texture of the Jerusalem stone in the Ark wall suggesting rock strata and the succession of generations; and the centrality to that wall of the Ark itself and the Torah scrolls within it.

The Design of the Tapestries

The colours of the 38 different hand-dyed coloured wools, gifted by Wilton Carpets, reflect the cycle of seasons, with cooler shades on the left of the Ark and warmer equivalent tones to the right. A third of each chair's colours filter into the next chair and get brighter or darker accordingly. The colour cycle is darkest nearer the congregation: the two most sombre-coloured chairs are the two High Holy Day chairs. They serve as reminders of the most serious days of the year – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The colour cycle graduates to brilliant on either side of the Ark, which symbolically glows, emitting the wisdom of the Torah. All contours reach upwards towards the Ark.

Every chair represents a specific season or religious festival to create the cycle of Jewish festivals, the sequence of chairs being from right to left. Each chair has a small off-centre vignette appliquéd onto it in silk thread petit point, and this contains a key word which encapsulates the underlying message of each festival, together with appropriate symbols.



Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

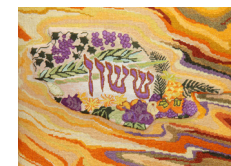
The two High Holy Day chairs at either end of the bimah signify the completion and re-start of the Jewish year.



The key Hebrew word is *Selichah* (forgiveness). We see the shofar which is sounded as a call to repentance, a tallit (prayer shawl) representing solemnity and prayer, the Book of Life recording all humanity's deeds, good and evil, from which grows a Tree of Life, branching equally to the past and future, with the future side bearing two more leaves than the past to show hope for improvements in the coming year.

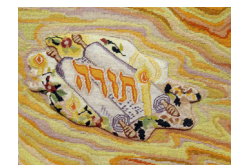
Sukkot

The key word is *Sason* (rejoicing). We see the lulav (palm, willow and myrtle) and etrog (citrus fruit) which are held together and shaken symbolically in the Sukkot service; fruit, vine and fig leaves show the abundance of nature and harvest.



Simchat Torah

The key word is *Torah* (teaching). We see an open scroll ready for study. Candles, flowers and seasonal



leaves are used for decoration to celebrate and glorify the continuity of the words of the Torah. The warm and brilliant gold are positioned nearest the Ark and reflect its glory.

Chanukkah

The key word is *Yeshuah* (salvation). We see the eight oil-fed flames together with the *shammash*, the servant candle.



These are reminders of the Maccabean battle for religious freedom and the cruse of oil which fed the re-dedicated Menorah for eight days. The brilliant yellow and gold colours indicate spiritual light and reach towards the reflected light from the Ark.

Pesach and Shavuot

The key word is *Cherut* (freedom). We see blossom and trailing leaves symbolising springtime, and wheat and barley showing the ancient biblical harvests. The dark green plant with its roots depicts the bitter herbs, a reminder of bitter tears of slavery, remembered at Pesach. Young trees with their roots represent new life and growth, and new planting at Shavuot.



Note: The Sukkot and Pesach/Shavuot chairs are duplicated to allow them to be divided between the upper and lower Bimah levels, as shown in the photo on the next page.

Community Project

The stitching of the canvases for the chairs was a remarkable community endeavour, with over a hundred LJS members contributing their time and skills. There was a real spirit of camaraderie amongst stitchers with many new friendships forged along the way. Similarly remarkable was the fact that from the outset there was a determination that no cost should fall on synagogue funds. Money was raised by the energetic efforts of the team, by generous donations from well-wishers and supporters, from bring-and-buy sales and Bridge competitions, and from the Penny Jar that used to sit in the foyer.

Our Thanks

We extend our thanks to everyone involved in this ambitious project, and remember with affection and gratitude members of the original team who are no longer with us: Ruth Ive, the originator of the entire concept, committee members Maureen Roe and Rosemary Lazarus, and Michael Adler who organised a fully computerised wool supply service. Very much still with us is the wonderful Jane Finestone (*pictured*) who not only created the inspired and inspiring design, but was the driving force behind the project, and whose enthusiasm and commitment has ensured we have the glorious bimah chairs we enjoy thirty years on, and will continue to enjoy far into the future.



Aftermath

Such was the success of the Chairscape bimah chair project that a few years later Jane was asked to produce chair designs for the foyer and entrance to the Montefiore Hall. Another community project, Seatscape, took place between 2011 and 2014 – a large community tapestry project to provide hand-stitched tapestry-cushioned seats in the Sanctuary. This was a perfect extension of the original concept.



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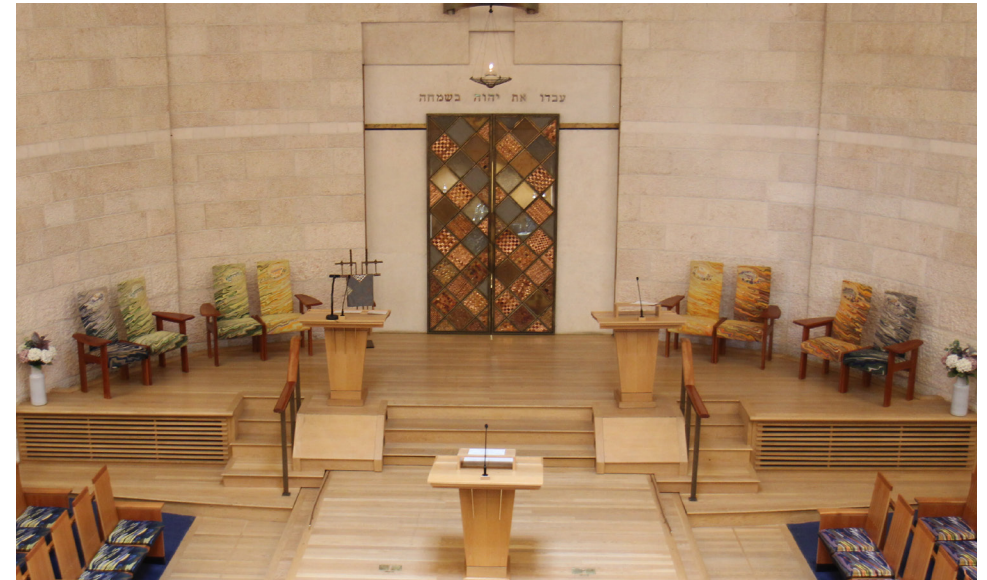


The Liberal Jewish Synagogue

The Bimah Chairs at The Liberal Jewish Synagogue

Members and Friends of the LJS, along with their guests and other visitors, often remark on the beauty of the tapestry chairs on the bimah in our Sanctuary.

In this leaflet we tell the story behind the creation of the tapestries on the eight chairs, and explain the meaning of each one.



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