

# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

## CHICAGO LOOP SYNAGOGUE

HABS No. IL-343

Location: 16 South Clark Street, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois.

Significance: Designed by the noteworthy firm of Loebel, Schlossman, and Bennett, the Chicago Loop Synagogue stands as an extraordinary example of Mid-Century religious architecture. The building contains a world-renowned stained glass window by Abraham Rattner, as well as sculptures by Henri Azaz.

Description: Bennett designed the synagogue as a series of experiences, not only for visitors, but also for passersby. Above the entrance doors is a large, forced perspective sculpture by artist Henri Azaz, entitled the *Hands of Peace*. Set against a richly textured backdrop of scripture, priestly hands stretch out in benediction. Through the large plate glass front, users then encounter the *Ten Commandments*, both in English and Hebrew. For Bennett, it was important to display these laws in a visible place, as a reminder that they are the foundation of many religions.

The main floor consists of a large foyer, an office, cloak rooms, and a small worship space designed for daily use. An important requirement of the design was the need for elderly congregants to access upper sanctuary floors without climbing stairs. Bennett originally suggested the installation of an elevator, but was informed that the use of electricity was prohibited by more Orthodox Jews on the Sabbath. Bennett's solution was a system of gently inclining ramps that carried the congregants to the main sanctuary. Memorial plaques line the walls on either side of the ramp, and are adorned with candles for members of the synagogue to light in remembrance of departed loved ones.

After ascending the ramp, the user is delivered into the main sanctuary with the world-renowned stained glass creation by artist Abraham Rattner on the eastern wall. Commissioned in 1957, Rattner spent 3 years studying and constructing the thirty-one foot by forty-three foot Mid-Century masterpiece. The work, fabricated at the leading stained glass studio in Paris, Atelier Barrillet, is entitled *Let There Be Light*, and is based on the text of Genesis 1:3. It symbolizes the nature of God's relationship to the universe, humanity, and the Jewish people.

Set within the east wall is the Holy Ark, also designed by Henri Azaz, which holds the scrolls of the Torah. The bronze doors of the Ark are inscribed with the Hebrew text of Proverbs 3:17-18. Atop the Ark is a metal sculpture composed of stylized Hebrew script forming a basin. The text comes from Numbers 24:5. Hovering above the entire composition is a chain-suspended, blown glass light fixture representing the *Eternal Light*, which stays lit at all times.

The window itself tells a fascinating story, using intricate designs and Hebrew symbols to convey the principles of Judaism. In the lower left panel, surrounding the Holy Ark, is the Flames of Fire, which remind the congregation that they are in the presence of the eternal and enduring Almighty. Above the Flames rises the Star of David, against the backdrop of the six-pointed Shield of David. At its center is the Tree of Life conceived as a seven-branched candelabrum, or Menorah, symbolizing the light of innermost perception. A spiral radiates out

from this point, embracing the universe by spreading the light of the Torah and the Spirit of God to all. Surrounding the Star of David and the Tree of Life, and spanning three panels, are the Twelve Tribes of Israel, represented by the first Hebrew letter of each tribe set in a square reminiscent of the engravings on the breastplate of the High Priest in ancient times. In the top left panel are two important symbols. The first is the Crown of the High Priest, which is the symbol for priesthood, the members of which were guardians of the Torah and keepers of the rituals and ceremonies at the Temple of Jerusalem. The second is the Great Shin, represented by the first letter of the Hebrew word “Shaddai,” which signifies the Omnipresent, the Supreme Being, the Creator of the Universe. The Great Shin is surrounded by concentric circles, symbolizing the rings of emanation, similar to the bands on a prayer shawl.

Located in the top panel of the central tier is the Menorah, envisioned as the tree of life and light. Traditionally, the Menorah is a symbol of the light of God. However, in this instance, the Menorah’s relation to the tree represents the mystery of nature. At the base of the tree is the Shofar, or Ram’s Horn, an ancient instrument used in the call for repentance on the High Holidays, the sound of which reminds worshippers of the presence of God. Nestled within the crook of the Shofar is the Etrog, or Citron, a fruit from the Holy Land which is used in the harvest festival ritual of Succoth. To the right of the tree is the Palm of Shins, which symbolizes the Palm Branch also used in the Harvest Festival of Succoth. Here, it is composed of shapes based on the Shin, the first Hebrew letter of the word “Shaddai.” While the seven shapes are different, they grow upward together, alluding to Jacob’s ladder, the connection between heaven and earth.

The far-right tier contains the Planets, Sun, Moon, and Star of David, which imparts the sense of timelessness and spacelessness that accompanies the people of Israel as they wander the Earth spreading the praise and worship of God. Stretching across the bottom of the window along its entire length is the Hebrew lettering of the morning and evening prayer, the Shema. In the bottom left are symbol of the Seven Elements and the Shofar, while the Tablets of the Law, and the Scroll of the Torah are located in the bottom right corner. All of these elements are set within a matrix of concrete and epoxy resin using the glass art technique known as *dale de verre*.

The northern wall of the sanctuary is composed of large granite blocks, assembled to recall the Western “Wailing” Wall in Jerusalem. A bimah, or raised platform, contains alters and a series of chairs reserved for the rabbi, officers, and honored guests. A sculptural menorah is situated to the left of the platform. The women’s gallery, located in the balcony, overlooks the sanctuary.

History: The Chicago Loop Synagogue was founded in 1929 to serve the needs of Jewish professionals working in Chicago’s downtown business district, commonly known as the “Loop.” Over the years, members of the congregation had rented space at various locations throughout the Loop to recite daily prayers and say *kiddish*. However, in 1951, after the architecture firm of Loeb, Schlossman, and Bennett had completed the construction of West Suburban Temple Har Zion, in River Forest, Illinois, members of the Loop Synagogue congregation commissioned the firm to design their permanent home at 16 South Clark Street in downtown Chicago. Richard Marsh Bennett was named the lead designer of the structure, which was dedicated in the Fall of 1958.

Jerrold Loeb (1899-1978) and Norman Schlossman (1901-1990) grew up in the Hyde Park neighborhood on Chicago’s south side. Together they attended Chicago’s Armour Institute (now

the Illinois Institute of Technology), graduating in 1921 with bachelor's degrees in architecture. At this time, Schlossman was also awarded the prestigious Hutchinson Medal. The pair partnered on their first commission in 1925 for the Harry Misch Residence in Glencoe, Illinois. In 1926, John DeMuth joined the firm, which gained praise that same year for Chicago's Temple Shalom (a design developed by Loeb and Schlossman while still in school). Over the next 15 years, the firm took on a steady stream of commissions, including the Music Corporation of America Building (1929), the Fashion Trades Building (1930), exhibits at the 1933 Century of Progress Exhibition, and the Twentieth-Century Fox and Monogram Pictures Corporation Building (1938).

In the period after the Great Depression, Loeb and Schlossman made notable contributions in the realm of federally funded housing and urban renewal. They created 500 units of war housing between 1940 and 1943, the success of which helped them secure commissions for several public housing projects for the Chicago Housing Authority, including the West Chesterfield Homes (1944), Wentworth Gardens (1946), and the Dearborn Homes (1950). In 1947, while working on Dearborn Homes, the firm recruited Richard M. Bennett (1907-1996), taking on the name Loeb, Schlossman, and Bennett.

Bennett, who was born in 1907 in Braddock, Pennsylvania, attended Harvard University, where he received his bachelor's degree in architecture in 1928 and master's degree in 1931.

During their partnership, the firm garnered national recognition for its design of Park Forest, a planned community in far south suburban Chicagoland. The firm became involved in urban renewal programs in the 1950s, primarily in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. The Michael Reese Hospital Complex (1950s-1960s) and the Prairie Shore Apartments (1958) were the results of these endeavors. Other notable works by the firm include 1350 N. Lake Shore Drive Apartments (1950), the Richard J. Daley Center (1966), as well as a number of Chicago-area suburban shopping centers including: Hawthorne, Oakbrook, and Old Orchard. Bennett left the firm in 1965 to pursue a career in academia.

Abraham Rattner (1895-1978) was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, to Jewish emigrants. As a child, he developed an interest in painting and drawing, eventually studying architecture at George Washington University in Washington, DC. Rattner ultimately decided to concentrate on painting, transferring to the Corcoran School of Art. World War I would eventually interrupt his studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Because of his background in painting, Rattner was assigned to the camouflage unit of the U.S. Army, where he worked to develop low-visibility uniforms for the troops under commanding officer, Homer Saint-Gaudens, son of sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens. After the war, Rattner settled in France, where he was influenced by numerous European modernist movements over the next twenty years, including, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Futurism. While in France, his work was influenced by the *avant-garde* movement that included artists such as Picasso, Dali, and Le Corbusier.

As tensions mounted in Europe, Rattner returned to the U.S. in the late 1930s, eventually founding his own summer arts school in East Hampton and Sag Harbor on Long Island. He continued to travel, taking up visiting artist residencies at many art schools and universities both at home and abroad.

By 1951, Rattner was beginning to experiment in stained glass. His first major foray into the medium happened in 1955 when he was invited to create a thirty-foot by thirty-foot stained glass panel for a nationwide exhibition sponsored by the Stained Glass Association of America and the American Federation of Art. The publicity from this exhibition likely led to both of his major stained-glass commissions at the DeWaters Art Center in Flint, Michigan and the Chicago Loop Synagogue.

Like his paintings on canvas, Rattner's stained glass designs are abstract, reflecting his exposure to the European *avant-garde*. Deeply affected by the public exposure of the horrors of the Holocaust and personal tragedy, Rattner's designs often integrated religious stories and themes from his Jewish heritage with references to destruction or nuclear war, conveying his concern for the human condition.

Nehemiah Henri Azaz (1923-2008) was born in Berlin in 1923 and taken to Palestine when he was only three months old. In 1955, Azaz founded and directed the Department of Artistic Ceramics at the Harsa factory, in Beersheba, Israel. There, through the Maskit initiative, he would design ceramics and jewelry for the first wave of cultural export in the growing state of Israel. By 1960, he left Harsa to begin exploring the ceramic medium for use in large-scale sculpture.

In 1965, Azaz was commissioned by the Sheraton Hotel, Tel Aviv to produce a sculpture, which proved highly successful, garnering him much attention. This led to international commissions, making him the first Israeli sculptor to receive such honors. While living in the United Kingdom, Azaz was commissioned by the Israeli Ambassador in Washington, DC, for which he carved a walnut wood wall for the Israeli Lounge at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Azaz eventually settled in Oxfordshire in England in the late 1960s, where he continued to complete works for commission in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Today, his surviving work includes sculptures at the Chicago Loop Synagogue, Belfast Synagogue, Pace University, and the Israeli Lounge at the JFK Center. His work also resides in London's Victoria & Albert Museum collection in London.

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