

Judaism

Site Visit Guide

Introduction

The word synagogue derives from Greek and means “coming together place”; in Jewish tradition it emerged as the institution through which Jews come together to feel God’s presence and worship him through song and prayer. Most of you will attend the Erev Shabbat—Sabbath’s Eve—service (Friday Sundown) or the Shabbat Service (Saturday morning). Both services recall God’s primal command to rest one day of the week so as to concentrate on God, connect to fellow Jews, and dwell within the sacred history of Judaism.

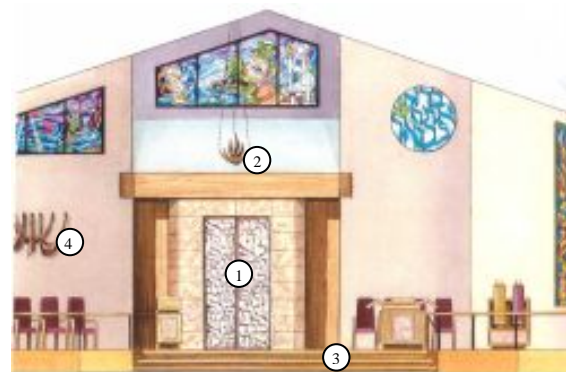
Arrivals

Dress: Synagogues are considered holy houses of God and your attire should reflect this status, though synagogues on the west coast tend not to be overly formal.

Time to arrive: You should arrive a few minutes before the start of the service, though congregants will often wander in late.

Where/how to enter: Men usually wear a kippah or yarmulke on their head as a sign of respect and a reminder that God is always above. In some Orthodox congregations, there will be separate entrances for men and women.

Architecture: Externally, synagogues tend to reflect the religious and secular architecture of their region. Internally, the focus is on **the Ark**, which is usually on the eastern wall. Often adorned with the Ten Commandments, this enclosure contains the Torah. The Torah itself is adorned with elements that are reminiscent of the special clothing the high-priests in Jerusalem would wear. Above the ark is something reminiscent of the **Eternal Flame** which represents the flame that once stood in the Temple in Jerusalem to remind Jews of their eternal covenant with God. Somewhere prominent is the **bimah** an elevated platform from which the Torah is read. In Orthodox synagogues, the bimah is often in the center but most other synagogues place it in front. You will also see a **menorah**, the seven-branched lampstand that once stood in the temple in Jerusalem. On the walls are often the names of deceased members of the congregation, sometimes forming a sort of ‘family tree’.



1. Ark
2. Eternal Flame
3. Bimah
4. Menorah (decorative)

What to expect during the service:

For those who are not familiar with Jewish services, the services can be difficult to follow, particularly when much of it is conducted in Hebrew. As a visitor, you are observing the style, form, and content of the Jewish service, so try not to spend every moment searching for the precise place in the book. The Jewish worship experience is rich, emotional, and grounded in long-standing traditions.

Structure of the Service

The service reflects the prayer of the community, so if a quorum or minyan (ten adult men; women are sometimes included in reform and some conservative communities) is not present, the service is not fully performed. The service follows the prayer book (siddur). The siddur usually contains both Hebrew and English, opening from right to left as one reads Hebrew. Most of the prayers are sung, often led by the rabbi or a chanter (chazzan) but can be led by any adult who is capable. While there are many differences in style and content among contemporary Jewish groups and parishes, the overall structure is quite uniform:

1. Introductory Prayers: while these differ depending on the time and the occasion, they usually include portions of the psalms and passages from the Hebrew Bible. This section ends with the Kabbalat Shabbat on Shabbat eve, literally the “receiving of the Sabbath.”

2. Shema and its blessing: This section begins with a formal invitation for everyone to pray together, called the Bar’chu. After several more prayers, there is the shema: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.” ...Deut. 6:4-9 One of the most interesting elements of this section on Shabbat morning is the ‘El Adon’, an alphabetical acrostic which praises God “from A to Z.”

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What to expect during the service (continued)

3. Amidah: The Amidah literally means the “standing prayer” but it is so central to Jewish prayer life that it is often just called “the prayer” by rabbis. It consists of a series of blessings and petitions, usually 18 in total. On Shabbat (when the world is seen as existing in fullness), the middle twelve petitions are usually eliminated and replaced with a blessing for peace and one to keep the holiness of the shabbat. It is often preceded by a silent period for private prayer and reflection.

4. Torah Service (Morning service only): This is the high-point of the service when the Torah is brought out from the ark, processed around the congregation (who always face the Torah), and intoned. Sometimes a reading from the Prophets follows, called the *haftarah*. A sermon explaining the Torah reading and relating it to life often follows the reading. In many communities, specific prayers for the government of the country and the state of Israel are said, especially for peace.

5. Concluding Prayers: This section has three sub-parts: Aleinu, Kaddish, and Closing Song of Shabbat. The Aleinu remembers God’s sovereignty and speaks of a time when idolatry will have vanished. The Kaddish is a prayer that invokes a desire for that world and is often said in memory of someone who has died. The closing song is a communal. On Saturday morning, an additional service called the Musaf may be said that reinforces many of the themes above.

Observation Tips/Participation

- You will often find individuals who are willing to assist you as you navigate the service. If you give a confused look, do not be surprised if someone comes beside you to help!
- The leader will usually tell the congregation when to stand and when to sit but generally the rule is: stand when the congregation stands; sit when the congregation sits.
- At certain points in the service, some Jews will bow; visitors who are following along and wish to bow may do this but it is not obligatory
- Some Jews will sway their body back and forth during prayers, reflecting the rhythm and emotion of the prayers. This practice is not mandatory and some Jewish leaders look down upon it.
- As a general rule, “amen” follows any blessing, so if you hear someone say, “barukh atah...” then get ready for an amen to follow at the end of the statement. Additionally, Amen is usually pronounced “Ah-men” rather than the traditional English pronunciation of “Aey-men”.

Afterwards

Following the service, the community usually gathers for food and drink. You are welcome to share in the joy of Shabbat with them, so do not be afraid to introduce yourself. The traditional greeting is “shabbat shalom.”

Additional Resources

1. <http://www.hillel.org/jewish/rituals/shabbat/default>—a primer on Shabbat developed by the Jewish College Youth Organization, Hillel.
2. <http://www.davening.net>; a resource on Jewish prayer and services produced by the mystically-oriented Orthodox Chabad group.
3. <http://scheinerman.net/judaism/synagogue/index.html> a good overview of synagogue life and the services contained within them by a conservative rabbi.

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