

Key words

Bet k'neset

Bet midrash

Mikveh

Bet din

Key concepts

With the destruction of the temple and exile in Babylon, it seemed as if the very centre of Jewish religious life had been lost. However, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel insisted that even in a faraway land with no temple, the people could have access to God through prayer. The people began to meet in small groups and then built temporary buildings that became known as synagogues (meaning 'to gather together'). These were to be used until the temple in Jerusalem could be rebuilt. Within the synagogue, the ark is the most important feature as it is modelled on the Sanctuary which originally housed the tablets of stone given to Moses at Sinai.

The synagogue is at the centre of each Jewish community and acts as more than just a place of worship. It is often also built with meeting rooms or a hall for community events. The bet k'neset is furnished for worship; the bet midrash refers to the role of the synagogue as a place of study.

Where there is a large Jewish community there is usually a bet din attached to the synagogue which makes judgements on civil disputes using Jewish law, and rules on religious matters. For example, they deal with business disputes, issues with Jewish divorce certificates and ensuring that food products can be declared kosher.

Synagogues have a central role to play in the celebration of festivals by bringing the Jewish community together, thus strengthening their bonds. It is evident that even secularised Jews attend the synagogue at certain festival times. Moreover, the opportunity for communal prayers is offered daily at three services held in the evening, morning and afternoon.

Some synagogues provide the facility of a mikveh for religious and physical cleanliness. Nowadays, the main use of the mikveh is for women, but it is also traditionally used before getting married or before conversion to Judaism.

Key quotes

'By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion ... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' (Psalm 137:1-4)

'Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you ... I will be found by you ... and will bring you back from captivity.' (Jeremiah 29:12-14)

'Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.' (Ezekiel 11:16)

'One must show great honour to the Torah scrolls and it is a mitzvah to set aside a special place for them, to honour that place, and to beautify it.' (Talmud)

'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.' (Ezekiel 36:25)

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments and debates

Does the synagogue have a main 'use' or 'purpose' within Judaism?

Its original use or purpose was to provide a place for Jews to meet as an alternative to the temple after its destruction. They were only meant to be temporary until the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem. It could be argued that it has a variety of uses, including prayer and worship, and as a place of education and ritual purity – a social hub. However, some might argue that a person can pray to God wherever they are and thus do not need to attend the synagogue to do so. Others might say that what goes on in the home is equally as important.

To what extent is a synagogue the heart of a Jewish community?

It certainly provides a venue for all aspects of Jewish religious and social life, and without a synagogue at the heart of the Jewish community, it would be harder to maintain a Jewish lifestyle, thus leading to assimilation into the wider community. However, the Jewish home could be said to have a more central role. It is also possible to define oneself as Jewish without attending the synagogue on a regular basis. There is more to Jewish living than congregating at a synagogue.