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Jewish Sacred Space in a 'City of Churches': Temple Emanuel in Lakeland, Florida

Lakeland, Florida is not considered the south. Florida, seen by many as Miami (a metropolis with a large Jewish population), is a nebulous state. But Lakeland, Florida, located half-way between Tampa and Orlando in Imperial Polk County, is a proto-typical “southern” town. With its economy primarily agricultural and its society strictly segregated, The small Jewish community remains barely a blip on the religious population radar of this Bible-Belt town. The story I will tell is of an increasingly affluent Jewish population creating an aesthetic identity: architecture is not the only way it did so, yet the implications and realities of constructing and occupying a sacred space required a unique and surprising set of socio-cultural maneuvers which situated Jews within their dominant community.

Aesthetic choices are coupled with geographical ones to identify the Jews of Polk County within their co-territorial population. I will thus be using the idea of “sacred” space in a cultural more than a religious sense: to proclaim a place “sacred” is, by definition, to attach theological importance to it. By applying the last definition of sacred offered by the Oxford English Dictionary, something that is “secured by . . . sense of justice or the like, against violation, infringement or encroachment,” the stakes involved in the Jews’ project becomes more clear. By adding the “sacred” to “space,” I insist that Jewish pioneers and residents recognized their task as more than just ethnic assimilation; in a town very much devoted to religion, the Jews needed to create a site within an already burgeoning religious landscape.

As Eric Goldstein has argued in *The Price of Whiteness*, the Jews may have had skin tone going for them within a culture very sensitive to issues of encroachment, but color is only one

facet of division.¹ Lakeland was also religiously, economically, and socially segregated. The most prestigious club, the Lakeland Yacht Club, was "restricted" up until the 1980s (excluding not just Jews and blacks, but Catholics and Baptists as well). The neighborhoods of the city were built around lakes, each area identified by its population. The black section of Moorehead surrounded Lake Beulah; the more exclusive Lakes Hollingsworth and Morton hosted the Yacht Club and mansions; the downtown leads up to a promenade at Lake Mirror. Architecturally, much of the town, built in the 1920s and 1940s during the Florida housing booms, offers bungalows in the Arts and Crafts style. Beginning at the end of the 1930s and stretching through the end of the 1950s, Frank Lloyd Wright built his modern "Child of the Sun" structures on Florida Southern College's campus on Lake Hollingsworth.² Architecture, then, was a part of the landscape and contributed to the construction of both communal and corporate identity in Lakeland.

The first Jewish peddler arrived in Lakeland in 1911 and was awed by the clarity of the water in Lake Mirror. By the mid-1920s the small Jewish community was growing. In a letter written in October of 1925, Tillie Estroff writes to friends back in Georgia, claiming "Lakeland is a very pretty town" and mentioning "Mr. Goldfarb of Augusta," who "bought a very pretty home here." At that time there was no move to establish a religious physical plant for the fledgling group—services were held irregularly above businesses or in private homes. When the economic boom gave way to bust by 1927, a surprisingly large number of Jews remained.

¹ Goldstein argues that "Jews ... try to conform to the prevailing racial paradigm and identify themselves unambiguously as white, [but] their ongoing commitment to a distinctive identity often cut against their attempts to claim whiteness" in a social way (2).

² Groundbreaking for the Annie Pfeiffer Chapel begins in 1938 and the Polk County Science Building is completed in 1958. ("Child of the Sun Visitor Guide")

Within only a few years, these permanent (year-round) residents thought about the future.

Tillie's eldest son would be the first to become a bar-mitzva.³

That happy event would be celebrated in the Jewish community's first physical home. In 1932 the newly-formed Jewish Alliance of Lakeland purchased a building from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church located in the Dixieland neighborhood (*Temple Emanuel Year Book*, 3)⁴. Strangely, when the group advertised their desire to form a "Jewish Sunday School" in 1933, they refer to the schul as a "clubhouse" ("To Be Formed"). Joseph Wolf, arriving from NJ in 1938, referred to the building as "a little Club House where the Jewish people congregated every now and then" (Wolf, Joseph 3). References to the Jewish house of worship as a "clubhouse" make the space seem less than "sacred." Purchased in 1932 and clearly used by 1933, the schul is not listed in the Lakeland City Directory until 1938, when it appears under "Churches," "Hebrew." In fact, the directories list the address as "vacant" in 1934 and 1936.

The obscurity of the group may be related to city bureaucracy⁵ and possibly to its location: during the Depression, Dixieland was an unfinished sub-division. Developers advertised it back in 1915 as a "fashionable suburb," the "surest, safest investment in Florida."⁶ The neighborhood featured a school and racially-based ownership requirements; however, by 1932, new construction in the neighborhood was slow or non-existent. One of the cross-streets for the new Temple was still unpaved in 1945. Certainly it was not a shameful address, but neither was it prime real estate. It also lacked what some Jews might have seen as halakhic amenities. The inside, fitted with pews and a raised platform at its far end, faced south rather than east towards Jerusalem.

³ Melvin Estroff was the first to have a bar mitzvah in the new building c.1933.

⁴ This first site was purchased for \$1,000.

⁵ City Directory employees often knocked on doors to find out about residents and without a telephone (which seems to have been the case up until the 1940s), the employees might have concluded the building was vacant.

⁶ Dixieland was "originated in 1907 when local real estate developers Henry B. Carter and C. W. Deen purchased 160 acres between Lakes Hollingsworth and Morton" (Logan).

The founding members made their choices based on economic and practical concerns. The sacred space in Polk County would serve the needs of a diverse group: people came from all over the large geographic area⁷; further, the members represented the kaleidoscope of Jewish practice from strict observance to secular. That the building already contained pews was convenient enough to squelch any desire to change their configuration. On the outside, too, little was done to distinguish the building as a synagogue. During the 17 years Temple Emanuel occupied the space, a sign identifying it as a Jewish house of worship never graced its front. The building was primarily used for services on Friday nights and Sunday school.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Jews of Lakeland flourished economically and, as Jack Wertheimer argues, the “upward mobility and Americanization of East European Jews” introduced a move away from “old world” style religious practice to a more staid and dignified ritual (Wertheimer, 117),⁸ a ritual which allowed Jews to blend in with their neighbors. The wealthy Jews of Lakeland remained in the “little synagogue” (Weitzenkorn). Eventually the congregation purchased and installed stained glass windows with stars of David—sometime during the 1940s.

Florida’s population boom just before and during World War II brought in war-time visitors and new residents with recent memories of large and established Jewish communities. Sam Pincus, stationed in Sebring from his home in Philadelphia, initially came to Lakeland just to visit his uncle Jack. Cele Bernard Stone was from Boston when she moved here with her husband Joe during the war. These war-time additions helped the community grow, and also changed the flavor of what had been a more “southern” community. Edith Schaffman, who moved here with her infant daughter in 1942 while her husband was overseas, felt a stronger

⁷ Sebring, Haines City, Lake Alfred, Winter Haven, Plant City and other surrounding towns.

⁸ Wertheimer credits his analysis to the work of Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York: Schocken, 1954): chapters 3 and 4.

connection with her “miniature” synagogue in Dixieland than she had ever felt up in Brooklyn (Schaffman).

By the end of the 1940s, the Temple was very aware of the logistical inadequacy of their space. Weddings, parties, even high holy day services had to be held at various locations around town because there just wasn’t enough room in the Patterson Street schul. Sam Siegel of Haines City, Temple Emanuel’s president in 1948, began a campaign to find a site to build a new temple. During this process, Harry Blumberg suggested an antebellum mansion owned by Florida Southern College. Surrounded by orange groves, it could be converted to serve a variety of needs for the community: the upstairs could be renovated to create a sanctuary which would—coincidentally, rather than by design—face east. The downstairs would serve for community events and Sunday school classes. Adding to its desirability was the location: many of Lakeland’s upper-crust were now moving south—away from the down-town area and older, smaller, Arts and Crafts bungalows. Dr. Ludd Spivey, President of the College, accepted the Temple’s offer, adding that “he had long thought that the tiny Temple certainly did not reflect the standing and importance of Polk County Jewry, and he was happy to be a part of correcting that situation” (Estroff, Selig).⁹

Spivey’s comment, related by Selig Estroff, a member of the Temple’s Board and a native son of Lakeland, demonstrates the ways that the move from Patterson Street represented a social as much as a geographical shift. While the original plan was to **build** their own unique space, the expedient option to purchase and modify an existing building won out. The primarily business-oriented community welcomed the cultural status conferred by the stately mansion; located on the exclusive Lake Hollingsworth and associated with a venerable

⁹ The group paid \$50,000, 50 times more than they had spent on the Patterson street synagogue.

Methodist Institution—Florida Southern College—the structure spoke eloquently to the upward mobility and increasing sense of entitlement of the community.¹⁰

The trend after World War II was the “community center” approach to congregational life. For the smaller Jewish settlements—like those in the south—the idea often seemed impractical. Without such a model, however, local Jews were more vulnerable to social ostracization. Mrs. Rhoda Wolf voiced a sense of alienation from the larger population, saying, “You were like an outsider; you couldn’t come in” (Rhoda Wolf). The new fashionable, yet isolated¹¹ address on Lake Hollingsworth was therefore designated by the Temple Yearbook for 1950-1951 as “A House of Prayer, a House of Learning and a House of Gathering” (*Temple Emanuel Yearbook*).

The new building boasted a Jewish star above the doorway and a sign identifying the home as “Temple Emanuel Community Center.” The entrance was striking, with its wide front door, grand double-sidelights, stained-glass transom, a broad crosshead and arched pediment which featured the star in the same white as the woodwork. “Temple Emanuel” was arched in white lettering against the brick and above the star. More prominently affixed on a dark background against the white woodwork were the words “Community Center.” In a “city of churches,” the Jews’ emphasis on the social aspect of their house of worship seems in keeping with the “clubhouse” designation of their early years (Newton). While the group was clearly comfortable with their rising economic position, there still seem to have been lingering doubts about calling attention to religious difference. As an aesthetic representation of the Jewish

¹⁰ The lay-out of the new building lends much to the rising social status of the community. From the front door, the visitor was greeted by a grand staircase and a welcoming entryway. To the right was a meeting hall and to the left the spacious dining room. The gracious wings of the mansion included two porches (with balconies above) and to the right, a covered carriage-way. The two-story edifice was surrounded by orange groves, and fronted by two stately palm trees, taller than the building itself. The actual sanctuary was up the stairs. (The walls that separated the bedrooms on the second story were removed to create one large hall.)

¹¹ At the time of the move, and until later in the 1950s, the synagogue was just outside the city limits.

community to the public, the house proclaimed socio-economic power, while de-emphasizing religious distinctiveness.

The community grew to over 250 families less than 10 years after the move (1956) and the Board proposed building a larger Temple designed professionally for that purpose. The mansion would remain as an education and youth activities center, and a modern synagogue would front the property on Lake Hollingsworth. The new building would at least partially block the house, commanding a view of the lake.

By Spring 1959, the Temple approved the architect's bold plans and raised enough funding to begin construction. On May 20, 1959, The *Lakeland Ledger* announced on its front page (above the fold), "Permit Sought for New Jewish Temple Here." The article describes the project in some detail: "Seating Capacity of 892 Planned" reads a heading. At the Temple Board meeting the next day, Leonard Wolf explained that "the plans . . . will be presented to the Zoning Board on June 4th., and . . . no trouble [is] anticipated." By May 26, however, a special meeting of the board was called. Mr. Ned Sinder, a Temple board member and local lawyer, was "reliably informed that there [would] be considerable opposition voiced at the public hearing" and the Temple should hire a lawyer. A prominent businessman on the board, Mr. Melvin Estroff, "reported that . . . certain city officials . . . told him that there [would] be opposition, and although they [the officials] have advised the opposition that their efforts would be to no avail, they have indicated that they would press the issue as much as the law would allow." The June 4th Zoning Board meeting turned into a July meeting, at which time counsel representing local property owners appeared, calling for a special meeting at the end of the month. The main argument was that a non-residential looking Temple "would cause a decrease in the value of adjacent and surrounding property" (Estroff, Selig).

The special meeting scheduled for July 23, 1959 was attended only by an acting Clerk, a Building Inspector and the attorney for the Temple. Sinder reported to the Temple Board in August that the appeal was now set for September 3rd: “The Delays have been caused by absenteeism on the Zoning Board.”¹² The case was not actually heard until October of 1959 (4 months later). By that time the opposition had acquired 400 signatures on a petition which it presented at a 7-hour meeting. In testimony, the Temple’s property appraiser offered voluminous evidence regarding property values, and Leonard Wolf, as spokesman for the congregation, was quoted in the *Ledger* as saying “this is a House of G-d, and anywhere G-d dwells is in conformity to the neighborhood around it” (“Court Test”). Wolf’s mention of G-d is the first appeal to the sacred. An appeal echoed by Rabbi Herman Schwartz, who argued that a denial was “an infringement against our constitutional rights – freedom of worship” (“On Church Petition”). To their credit, at least one zoning board member saw the shallow nature of the objections: “Tommy Tucker said, ‘In view of the fact that surrounding property owners have known of the existing zoning ordinances to cover churches on residentially-zoned land, and since this board has made 17 similar grants since 1956, I move the petition be approved’” (“On Church Petition”). The final vote was 4-0 with one member abstaining.¹³ Technicalities triumphed: because one of the members of the board was not in attendance at the time of the hearing, and at least five members must vote in the affirmative to allow the action, it did not pass.

At their October 8th meeting, the Temple Board “Resolved, that the Board give the Rabbi the authority to make a statement on the moral issues of the zoning question at such time as the attorneys approve.” Whether the attorneys never agreed or further developments

¹² At the September 10 meeting, the Board authorized “legal expenses incurred in obtaining the Zoning permit . . . be paid from the Building fund Reserve.”

¹³ Winn Silver claimed he “was not qualified to vote on such a controversial issue and felt it should be decided by a higher court” (“On Church Petition”).

made the action unnecessary, Rabbi Swartz never penned a statement. The baldly anti-semitic nature of the objections was all too clear: members of the Temple's board were receiving threatening phone calls and the situation was reaching a head (Wolfson). "[V]irtually the entire top business, legal, and professional leadership in the community had signed the petition" (Estroff, Selig)¹⁴. The signers did have one thing in common: they were all members of the Lakeland Yacht Club.

On October 11th, 1959, Dr. John Newton, minister of the First Presbyterian Church, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Lakeland Ledger* (Newton).¹⁵ Newton's frank words—"If the wretched spirit of anti-semitism is rearing its nasty head, it must die aborning"—labeled the opposition for what it was. His own parishioners were part of that opposition.¹⁶ As first the Baptist Conference ("Baptists," 12 October) and then the Ministerial Association ("Ministerial Association," 20 October) backed the Jewish community, Newton's boldness paid off. Not one of the subsequent supporters of the Temple actually mentioned anti-semitism, though within days the petition was (quite literally) removed from the records. On November 5, 1959, the Zoning Board gave its unanimous approval to the proposal—with all the members of the board in attendance (Butler, Willis).

¹⁴ Estroff also mention that "no more than 100 signers were homeowners close enough to the Temple to possibly be affected."

¹⁵ "Like most churches in this 'City of Churches,' the Temple has found it must expand its facilities in order to accommodate its growing membership." Newton continued, "To an objective observer it looks as though those who would deny them this privilege are saying to them in effect: 'Since you were here before we were, we cannot make you move. But we'll make things untenable for you by not allowing you to build.'"

¹⁶ Political tensions were evident, as demonstrated by this letter, written to Newton by then mayor of Lakeland, Tom Joyner, Jr.: "At the time you wrote the letter to the editor which remedied an extremely bad situation I was serving as mayor of our town. I want to thank you, as mayor, for the example your courage set for this community. I feel that this letter was the example of the courage one man willing to bring the truth forward. You performed a tremendous service to your community and many of us appreciate it greatly" (Joyner).

No co-territorial opposition emerged after the purchase of the church on Patterson Street—even after stained-glass Jewish stars adorned its windows; or after Florida Southern’s sale of the mansion on Lake Hollingsworth with a sign above its front doors; the elite of Lakeland had chosen to fight a modern synagogue on Lake Hollingsworth. I might argue now that socio-economic tension—the rising financial power of Jews in Lakeland’s business community—had been a threat to the established hierarchy of the town. But my interest is more in aesthetic gesture today. What the Jews of Lakeland had unwittingly done in their earlier creation of sacred space was reinvent/repurpose already established structures. While the inclusion of a variety of props of Judaism—the ark, the torahs, the eternal lamp—helped make the **interior** Jewish, the exterior remained non-ethnic and, generally, unremarkable. The objections were not about the Jews’ legal right to occupy the space they had purchased, but HOW they occupied that space. “The opponents’ attorney . . . contended that the existing structure was a converted residence, and therefore consistent with the appearance of the rest of the neighborhood” (“Court Test”). Still, by 1959, Frank Lloyd Wright had already completed both the Annie Pfeiffer Chapel (1941) and the Danforth Chapel (1955), ultra-modern representations of sacred space on Lake Hollingsworth. The Temple’s Board decision to find an architect to create the new temple in a modern mold should not have created such a stir. Wilfred Wolfson, a member of the board at that time, claimed that the Temple chose to go to New York for their architect because they did not want a church, they wanted to build a synagogue (Wolfson).

Why didn’t the historically savvy members of Temple Emanuel foresee the controversy? The men who instigated the plan were predominantly veterans of World War II, men with extensive life experience. Perhaps a more “southern” congregation might have seen the possibility of such a hail-storm, but the post-war confidence of the transplanted and

recently discharged men meant that they felt strongly about having shared values with the town and her citizens. This belief made the Zoning Board fiasco an indignity that stung all the more. The men were not naïve, but as Deborah Dash Moore argues in her *GI Jews*, “Notwithstanding the enduring evidences of racial and religious discrimination, they [returning veterans of World War II] believed in the commitment of the United States to move toward equality” (259).¹⁷ As a result, the community as a whole felt strongly about their rights to not just occupy space but represent themselves through and with it—especially in relation to religion. The bold, and ultimately successful move made by the Jewish men (and women) of Lakeland was the culmination of a mature sense of entitlement as Americans who happened to be Jews.

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¹⁷ Part of this confidence was based on the assumptions created by Judaism’s new status as one of the three “fighting faiths of democracy” (Moore 10).

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