1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE

Other Name/Site Number: Synagogue of Congregation Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz (Community of the People of Israel with the People of Lubz)

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 12-16 Eldridge Street Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: New York Vicinity: N/A

State: New York County: New York Code: 061 Zip Code: 10002

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property		Category of Property	
Private:	X	Building(s):	X
Public-Local:	___	District:	___
Public-State:	___	Site:	___
Public-Federal:	___	Structure:	___
		Object:	___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
1	_____	Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ Entered in the National Register
___ Determined eligible for the National Register
___ Determined not eligible for the National Register
___ Removed from the National Register
___ Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper Date of Action

6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic:	RELIGION	Sub:	Religious Facility (Synagogue)
Current:	RELIGION CULTURE	Sub:	Religious Facility (Synagogue) Museum

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Mid 19th Century: Exotic Revival (Moorish)

MATERIALS:

Foundation:	Granite
Walls:	Brick
Roof:	Slate
Other:	Terra Cotta (cornice and stringcourses)
	Granite (colonettes)

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

INTRODUCTION

The Synagogue of Congregation Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz[1], more familiarly known as the Eldridge Street Synagogue, is located on Eldridge Street between Canal and Division Streets in New York, New York. It was designed by the architectural firm of Herter Brothers to be a grand expression of Orthodox Judaism on the Lower East Side.[2]

The Herter Brothers operated with relatively few religious constraints when they designed the Eldridge Street Synagogue, because Orthodox tradition stipulates only that the *Aron ha-Kodesh* (Holy Ark) must face toward Jerusalem and there must be separate entrances and seating for men and women. The Herters used a combination of Gothic, Romanesque, and Moorish styles. The building's design is an eclectic mix of these styles: the twin towers surrounding the central bay with its rose window are Gothic elements; the bulk of the masonry and the heavy terra cotta surrounds are Romanesque; and the horseshoe arches on both the exterior and interior, as well as the interior decorative elements, are Moorish Revival. The Moorish style had come to be widely considered an appropriate Jewish expression because of its allusion to the so-called "Golden Age" in Spain and also because the style did not carry with it the legacy of Christian use.[3] The grouping of elements echoes the *Gematria*, a system of interpretation based on the numerical value of Hebrew letters and words. Here, number references on both the exterior and interior show that the building was constructed to be a synagogue rather than a remodeled church.

There have been very few alterations to the synagogue over time, the most notable being the replacement of the damaged stained glass rose window on the east elevation. Decades of

---

1 The congregation spelled their name inconsistently throughout their history. The spelling used in this document is the one considered easiest to pronounce in English.

2 Hyman B. Grinstein, "Communal and Social Aspects of American Jewish History," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 39 (1950): p. 267. According to Grinstein, around 1880 there was a competition among the sixty extant synagogues to be awarded the title of "Jewish Community of New York." There was also a movement to designate a chief rabbi for the entire Orthodox community. These two factors may have motivated the congregation to build such a magnificent structure. The reasons for building the synagogue are discussed in detail in the Statement of Significance.

3 From approximately the tenth through the twelfth centuries in Spain, Jews lived in peace with Moslems and Christians and all three cultures thrived. Because most synagogues built in New York during the first half of the nineteenth century were Gothic or Romanesque in style, the Eldridge Street Synagogue's innovative display of the Moorish Revival style distinguished it immediately from its predecessors. The most notable example of Moorish Revival architecture in New York City prior to Eldridge Street was the first Temple Emanu-El (1868) building on Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street. It is no longer standing. A number of historians believe that the congregation at Eldridge Street engaged in an architectural competition with Temple Emanu-El, which was at that time the cornerstone of the Reform movement in New York. The Eldridge Street Synagogue is similar in proportion and basic design to Temple Emanu-El; the differences are mostly reflected in the smaller size of the Eldridge Street lot. Central Synagogue (1872), designated a National Historic Landmark in 1975, is another fine example of Moorish Revival.

neglect, harsh weather, and an inadequate and leaking roof caused serious damage to both the structure and the sanctuary, leaving the building in its present somewhat deteriorated state. The building has been stabilized and an extensive restoration project has begun.

THE ARCHITECTS

Peter and Francis William Herter arrived from Germany between 1880 and 1884. Their firm's first commissions came from German clients in Yorkville. Soon they would focus their attention on the Lower East Side. In 1886, they completed work on two tenements at 43-45 Eldridge Street, which they pursued concurrently with their work on the Eldridge Street Synagogue. When the Herter Brothers received the commission for the synagogue, it was only their fifth since arriving in America. It would be their first and only synagogue.

The commission for the synagogue probably launched the careers of the Herter Brothers in America. Not only did they receive commissions from members of the congregation, such as Isaac Gellis and Sender Jarmulowsky, but also from others in the neighborhood. From the time the synagogue was built until 1893, the Herter Brothers designed over sixty buildings in Lower Manhattan, more than fifty of which were on the Lower East Side. Two loft buildings and several tenements remain. Three interesting examples are 3-5 Elizabeth Street, 14-16 Orchard Street, and 166 Henry Street (built for Jarmulowsky), all built in 1887. They were known for building tenements with more gracious amenities, which in Peter Herter's opinion would garner higher rents and ensure full occupancy. They were also known for their elaborate facades. Many of the elements found in the synagogue, such as the Stars of David and horseshoe arches, can also be found on their tenements.[4] After financial difficulties in 1893 and years with few commissions, the brothers dissolved their partnership and each went into independent practice.[5]

THE BUILDING AND ITS SITE

In 1886, the congregation purchased three adjacent lots (12, 14, and 16 Eldridge Street) for the purpose of erecting the synagogue as a free-standing structure with windows on all sides. Lots 14 and 16 were purchased for $23,000, and lot 12 was purchased for $12,850.[6] The width of the lots total 59'11" in the front, 60'0" in the rear, with a depth of 87'6".

According to the records in the Department of Buildings, construction began on

---

4 John Donald Stewart, *A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz, 12-16 Eldridge Street, New York*, Master's Thesis, Historic Preservation Program, Columbia University, 1979, pp. 12-14.

5 Peter and Francis William Herter, who maintained offices at 191 Broadway, should not be confused with the better-known Herter Brothers, the cabinet makers and designers noted for their theater and residential interiors in New York City. The latter firm, located at 154 Fifth Avenue, was still active in the 1880s but no longer under the direction of its founders, half-brothers Gustave (d. 1898) and Christian (d. 1883). Also practicing at this time was Henry Herter, a partner of (Daniel) Schneider & Herter, with offices at 48 Bible House on Cooper Square. Schneider & Herter designed the Park East Synagogue (1889) at 163 East 67 Street, and a synagogue for Kahal Israel Anshe Poland (1892) at 27 Forsyth Street, less than a block away from Kahal Adath Jeshurun. Any relationship between Henry Herter and brothers Peter and Francis William has yet to be ascertained. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Eldridge Street Synagogue Designation Report*, 1980.

6 Stewart, p. 4.

September 24, 1886 and was completed on September 30, 1887[7]. The building is 53'0" wide in the front and rear and 79'0" deep, with narrow alleys on the north and south sides leading to tiny courtyards on either side of the extension that comprises the Ark. The alleys and courtyards enabled the building to have windows on all four sides. The front elevation is set back from the street and separated from the sidewalk by an iron fence with cast iron newel posts.

The spacial limitations of a tight urban plot necessitated a rectangular building plan. Two stair towers provide access to all levels including the level above the balcony where in the south tower there was once a women's lavatory. A system of skylights that had been closed for years was discovered in the crawl space above the balcony in the late 1980s. Although the original specifications called for a more prominent tower scheme and a Dorchester stone facade, both ideas were abandoned before construction. This may explain why the original construction cost was estimated to be $38,000, but the cost was said to be $19,000 in articles about the opening ceremonies.

The building is comprised of brick masonry walls with wood girders and joists. The foundation walls are stone to a depth of ten feet below curb level resting on earth. The main roof rafters, braced to form trusses, support a domed and barrel-vaulted ceiling below and a slate roof above. There are two rows of wood columns that provide additional support.[8]

EXTERIOR

The facade is buff-colored pressed brick in running bond with molded brick, terra cotta, and stone details over a basement of matching brick and rusticated gray granite. Above the basement, the front elevation is divided vertically into three bays with a wider central bay flanked by narrower side towers and horizontally divided into three levels separated by elaborate stringcourses or cornices. From the street level, two sets of granite steps lead down to the basement level and three sets of steps lead up to the main level.

Pairs of elaborately carved wood doors mark the entrances to the main level: two pairs at the top of the double-wide center stairs and one pair in each stair tower. Moorish horseshoe arches made of molded brick nailhead molding and stone pilasters surround these entrances as well as the two narrow windows on either side of the center entrance. Elaborate stringcourses of stone and terra cotta separate the first level from the second and the second level from the third. The second level contains five smaller horseshoe-arched window openings in the center bay with two in each side tower. The third level contains a single horseshoe-arched window in each tower and a rose window surrounded by a horseshoe-shaped arch in the center bay. Usually, Gothic rose windows are associated with Christian churches, but here, the Star of David motif in the stained glass reveals the Jewish affiliation. A horseshoe-arcaded parapet delineates the steep gable of the central bay, while the towers have flat parapets. Metal cresting, aediculae, and finials originally adorned the top of the cornice, but were removed in 1960.

The facade groups elements in numbers with a Biblical significance. For example, configurations of twos, as in the pairs of entrance doors or windows, may represent the

---

[7] Several contemporary "reviews" of the building at its opening predate the official September 30 completion date cited in the Buildings Department records by several weeks.

[8] Giorgio Cavaglieri and Beth Sullebarger, *Historic Structures Report, Eldridge Street Synagogue*, March 1986, Appendix D; NYC Department of Buildings, Application for Erection of Buildings, No. 1266/86, 12 July 1886; Amendment, 16 Sept. 1886; and Final Report of Inspection, 30 Sept. 1887.

tablets of the Ten Commandments. Groups of three, such as the three points of the central pediment, recall the three fathers of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Groups of four, such as the four pairs of entrance doors, recall the four matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. Groups of five, such as the central cluster of small windows at the second level, stand as reminders of the five books of Moses. Twelve, such as the roundels of the rose window, may represent the twelve tribes of Israel.[9]

The side and rear elevations of the synagogue are common red brick laid in common bond. In addition to the windows on the front elevation, there are stained glass windows on the north, south, and east elevations of the sanctuary and on the sides of the towers. Originally, there was a rose window on the east elevation of the sanctuary, but it was replaced in 1944 by glass blocks in the shape of two sets of paired tablets.[10] The outline of the rose window can still be seen on both the exterior, where it was filled in with brick, and on the interior, where it was plastered and painted to match the blue and gold star field surrounding it. Because the ground level of the alleys is lower than the front of the building, and because the synagogue is free-standing, there are large windows on the basement level as well.

INTERIOR

A contemporary critic, Mi Yodka, wrote about the opening of the Eldridge Street Synagogue:

> The building, which fronts on Eldridge Street, looks quite imposing, standing in the neighborhood as it does, and makes even a better impression on stepping into its interior, which is distinguished by an elegant simplicity and plentiful supply of air and light from the many and high windows.[11]

The primary space of the synagogue is the sanctuary on the main level, extending from the foyer and stair towers at the west end to the Ark on the east wall. The balcony extends over the side aisles and rear (west end), supported by two rows of columns on the main level that divide the space into three longitudinal sections. The arcade in the balcony is defined by a

---

9 Dr. Eric Ray, *Numbers as Symbols in the Facade of the Eldridge Street Synagogue*, TS, n.d., Collection of the Eldridge Street Project.

10 New York City Department of Buildings, B.N. 2596/44, dated 11 Dec. 1944 for the replacement of stained glass and terra cotta rose window with brick and glass block windows. Richard Shutkind, Architect. Unfortunately, congregation records do not detail the damage to the rose window or the reasoning behind the new design.

11 Mi Yodka, *The American Israelite* 34 (September 16, 1887), p. 4.

second tier of columns that support horseshoe-shaped arches. Within each bay in the balcony is a small dome supported by pendentives. Over the central section, seventy feet high, is the barrel-vaulted and domed ceiling.

The balcony, with its stepped-up seating arrangement, is made of wood with a carved railing. The wood columns that support the balcony are painted to look like marble and have decorative plaster capitals with a sea-shell pattern and gold-leaf trim. The Moorish horseshoe arches above the balcony are also supported by elaborate plaster capitals on faux marble columns.

Located on the east wall is the ornately carved walnut wood Ark. The inside of the Ark, which can hold twenty-four Torahs, is built into a small extension of the building. In front of the Ark is the lectern and cantor's platform, or *amud*. The *bimah*, the platform from which the Torah is read, is located in the center of the sanctuary, a reference to the placement of the sacrificial altar in the original Temple in Jerusalem. In the era before amplification, this location made the best use of natural acoustics. Both the *amud* and the *bimah* are surrounded by a carved wood balustrade and can be reached by steps on two sides. A pattern of two footprints has been worn into the carpet in front of the *amud*; this is where the cantor stood when he *davened* (prayed). The wood floor of the sanctuary is also worn in front of each bench; over time, grooves were made by the thousands of worshippers who moved their feet in specific patterns while praying.

The walls and domes are plaster and lath. The plaster moldings and trim were formed in place by running a metal template through wet plaster. The capitals were cast in molds. Decorative finishes cover every surface in the sanctuary using almost every painting technique from pounce and stencil to *faux bois* and *trompe l'oeil*. Judaism interprets the second commandment to mean that figurative or anthropomorphic symbols, which might be perceived as images of G-d, should not be displayed in the synagogue.[12] Instead, all patterns are geometric, abstract, or organic. Gold leaf stars on blue fields appear in all the domes as well as on the east and west walls. The intertwining leaves and spade-shaped patterns are suggestive of Moorish styles.

Paint analysis uncovered two decorative paint schemes. Both schemes used the same patterns, the second laid directly over the first but slightly off register. According to the congregation's records, the first decorative paint scheme was applied in 1896. The walls and columns were painted to look like stone in tones ranging from taupe to salmon with veining done in blues, grays, and white. The second paint scheme was applied after the building was electrified. The colors changed slightly; for example, the blue in the domes was painted darker shades over time, and stars were not stenciled on the last layer. The patterns in the pendentives and coffers were not only ornate, but were also painted to give a three-dimensional appearance.

The sanctuary is lit by natural light from the many stained glass windows, as well as by numerous brass fixtures. The elaborate brass fixtures include a large chandelier, a menorah, the *ner tamid* (eternal light), torcheres on the four corners of the *bimah*, wall sconces, and column fixtures. Many of these fixtures were originally gas-lit and were converted to electricity starting in approximately 1909. Electrification took place gradually. Schoolhouse-style milk-glass fixtures were added under the balcony some time in the 1930s or 1940s.

---

[12] "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." (Exodus XX:4)

The basement level, in its current configuration, consists of a small hall of instruction and a few offices, reached by two staircases from the street. Above street level are the sanctuary and balcony.

ALTERATIONS OVER TIME

Over the years few alterations have been made, and those few have not affected the integrity of the building. As stated above, the building was originally lit by gas fixtures and was electrified in the early 1900s. As the fixtures were converted to electricity, lights were also added to the Ark. Other minor alterations include the installation of toilets in the basement and on the third floor of one of the towers in 1920. It is believed that the hexagonal floor tiles in the foyer of the lobby were probably added some time in the 1940s. A water closet was added to the sanctuary at some point and then removed. The closet remains, but its function was not discovered until structural work exposed old plumbing.

The basement level includes the *beth hamedrash* (study hall), where the congregation convenes today, and the Eldridge Street Project's small offices. The area has undergone minor changes only. An interesting historical element, a hearth in the former rabbi's study, was uncovered during the excavation.

The most obvious alteration to the building was the replacement of the rose window on the east elevation with glass blocks in 1944. At some point, the skylights were closed up and the roof was covered in asphalt sheeting. The Star of David finials on the top of the facade were removed in the 1960s; they will be replaced by lighter-weight (e.g., fiberglass) duplicates to meet New York City codes.

CURRENT CONDITIONS

The building's present deteriorated condition is the result of bad weather, a leaky roof and a lack of consistent maintenance, especially in the period after 1950, when the congregation moved downstairs from the main sanctuary to the lower level *beth hamedrash*.[13] During the emergency stabilization and rescue operation, the interior of the north stair tower collapsed. These wood stairs will not be replaced; instead, an elevator with a staircase wrapping around the elevator shaft will be installed to make the sanctuary accessible to disabled visitors.

All of the light fixtures were removed during the stabilization process and carefully catalogued and stored. Much of the stained glass was also removed and crated until the restoration is complete. Lexan, a plexiglass, was installed in all of the windows. As stained glass windows have been restored, they have been reinstalled.

Restoration work to date has included improvements to the foundation, roof, internal stairs, south elevation, and facade. With its intricate masonry virtually intact, the elegant Eldridge Street Synagogue continues to provide a striking contrast to the modest tenement buildings that surround it.

---

[13] Over decades, as many Jews left the Lower East Side, the congregation was reduced to fewer than a hundred. Members were unable to support the heating bills or repairs required in the main sanctuary. They closed the doors to the sanctuary some time in the mid 1950s. Local preservationists came to the aid of the congregation beginning in the 1970s, when they launched a volunteer-led renewal and restoration effort. The Eldridge Street Project was incorporated in 1986 to raise the funds needed and to administer the full-scale restoration.

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:
Nationally: X Statewide:___ Locally:___

Applicable National Register Criteria: A X B___ C___ D___

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A X B___ C___ D___ E___ F___ G___

NHL Criteria: 1, Exception 1

NHL Theme [1987]: XXX. American Ways of Life
E. Ethnic Communities

[1994]: I. Peopling Places
3. Migration from outside and within
4. Community and neighborhood

II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements
3. Religious institutions

Areas of Significance: Religion
Social History

Period(s) of Significance: 1886-1924

Significant Dates: 1887

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Herter Brothers, Architects

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

SUMMARY

The Eldridge Street Synagogue[1] (1887) is the most important artifact of Eastern European Orthodox Judaism in America. It is the first great house of worship built by Eastern European Jews in the United States,[2] located in the neighborhood through which more Jewish immigrants have passed than any other.

Eastern European Jews arrived in the hundreds of thousands in the late nineteenth century to form the largest immigrant group then living in the United States.[3] The vast majority of

---

1 Throughout we use the word "synagogue" to signify an edifice built or used as a house of worship. We have attempted to keep the architectural form distinct from the people (congregation, or group of worshippers) for whom the building serves religious, educational or social functions.

2 We use the word "great" to distinguish Eldridge Street from another, more modest Eastern European synagogue that opened a year earlier. In the spring of 1886, the Eldridge Street congregation, Kahal Adath Jeshurun (KAJ), in New York City and Beth Israel in Rochester, New York simultaneously finalized plans to build synagogues. Both began construction that summer. It is not surprising that Eldridge Street, with its monumental scale and degree of ornamentation, took considerably longer to complete. The bureaucratic challenges of building in New York City may have also prolonged the construction process. No materials exist to document the precise moment at which either congregation dreamed of building their own edifice. (See Appendix A for a full comparative discussion.)

3 According to Irving Howe, there were approximately 7,500 Jews in New York between 1820 and 1870 (a mix of Sephardim, with origins in Spain, Portugal and North Africa, and Germans), and between 40,000 and 60,000 in the 1870s, by which time German Jews predominated. The Eastern European "flood" of immigration to America, following a series of brutal anti-Semitic pogroms, brought the number of Jews in New York to a figure somewhere between 500,000 and 1,100,000 by 1910. See Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and The Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1976). For ebbs and flows of Russian immigration to New York and tables showing the growth of the Russian population in America, see Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 270-271, and Deborah Dwork, "Immigrant Jews On the Lower East Side of New York: 1880-1914," in Jonathan Sarna, ed., *The American Jewish Experience* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1986), 102-117. Dwork claims that between 1881 and 1914 two million, or one-third of all Eastern European Jews, left their homes for America. The foreign-born Russian population of New York City expanded from 1,224 in 1870 to 445,628 in 1910. The only groups who came close to equaling the Russian population in New York in 1910 were the Italians with 340,770 foreign-born, Germans with 274,666, and Irish with 252,672. For information substantiating the scale of Eastern European Jewish migration in relation to Irish, Italian and other immigrant groups, see Kate Cleghorn, "Foreign Immigration Into the United States," in Robert W. DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, *The Tenement House Problem: Including the Report of the New York State Tenement House Commission of 1900*. 2 vols. (New York:

these immigrants, traditional practitioners of what is now known as Orthodox Judaism,[4] entered the country through New York's Lower East Side, permanently transforming the city into an international Jewish capital. New York housed, and continues to house, the largest Jewish population of any city in the world. Eldridge Street was the first synagogue the Eastern Europeans built for themselves in the city that was the heart of American Jewish life.[5]

Because the Eldridge Street Synagogue has been used continuously by America's oldest Eastern European congregation, it is an invaluable resource for understanding the birth of the Orthodox movement in America in the period from 1886-1924, as well as the evolution of the movement over more than a century. Just as Touro Synagogue and the Isaac M. Wise Temple were focal points for Colonial-era Sephardic Jews and German Reform Jews, respectively, Eldridge Street was the central religious institution for Eastern European Orthodox Jews, the third and largest wave of Jewish immigrants to America. Just as cities like Charleston and Cincinnati have national significance as the birthplace of the Reform movement in America, New York, and specifically the Lower East Side, is the home of Orthodox Judaism in this country.

The story of the congregation at Eldridge Street illustrates how immigrants with profound and traditional (i.e., Orthodox) religious convictions used their public institutions to help

---

Macmillan Co., 1903), and also informal materials distributed by the National Park Service at Ellis Island.

4 What became known as "Orthodox" Judaism in America was the predominant form of Judaism in Eastern Europe, where traditional practitioners followed the two-thousand year old *halacha* (law) proscribed in Torah and Talmud. But, as Jenna Weissman Joselit writes, "The very notion of `Orthodoxy' and `Orthodox Jews'–a distinct community with specific behaviors–was itself a statement of modernity, a concession to the changed reality in which the observant Jew, once in the majority, now found himself." See Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Inter-War Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 3-4. Reform Judaism had its roots in Germany in the period from 1780 to 1810, when upper-class Jews altered traditional religious practices in response to ideals of the Enlightenment and to appear more like their Christian neighbors. In America, with the large-scale immigration of German Jews in the 1840s, the Reform movement increased in popularity, particularly after Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise published his alternative prayer book, *Minhag Amerika* (the American rite or custom). The movement reached its zenith after the 1885 formulation of the Pittsburgh Platform, a manifesto that delineated the guiding principles of the movement and positioned Reform as an American Judaism. It should be understood that, at the turn of the century, "Orthodox" and "Reform" Judaism were both evolving in Europe and America. Our consistent use of the capital "O" and "R" in this essay may overstate the cohesiveness of the movements. See Stephen Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa, 1794-1881* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985) and various essays in Jack Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

5 Three other eminent synagogues have been honored with National Historic Landmark designation, Central Synagogue in New York City, the Isaac M. Wise (Plum Street) Synagogue in Cincinnati, Ohio and Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina. For an analysis of their respective historical significance in relation to that of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, please see Appendix B.

construct new identities in this country while solidifying religious commitments deeply rooted in personal history and cultural memory. The Eldridge Street congregation was exceptional among its Eastern European peers in having the financial assets and aspiration to build its own synagogue, but the group was representative in its struggle to carve out a place in the American religious landscape on its own terms.

From the year of the building's construction in 1886 to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, the founding generation at Eldridge Street presents, in microcosm, the religious experiences of countless immigrants, both Jewish and non-Jewish, as they confronted the tension between traditional religious observance and the forces of modernization.[6] Leaving their first homes on Eldridge, Orchard, Hester, or Delancey Streets, Eastern European Jews later fanned out to populate cities and small towns all across America. Their descendants, who compose the majority of American Jews today,[7] can look to the Eldridge Street Synagogue as a "spiritual home," the oldest surviving landmark of Eastern European religious life on the Lower East Side, and their grandparents' gateway to America.

A JEWISH IMMIGRATION CHRONOLOGY

To understand the importance of the Eldridge Street Synagogue and the world within which it emerged, one must first trace the chronology of Jewish immigration to New York and the network of synagogues that proliferated from three major immigration waves.

Each group of Jewish settlers to America–the Spanish, Dutch, and English in the 1600s, the Germans after 1815 and 1848, and the Eastern Europeans in the late nineteenth century–formed their own religious and ethnic communities in New York and organized

---

6 Jews were not the only ones who needed to negotiate between tradition and new cultural practices in America. John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) explores the impact of capitalism, modernization, and industrialization in European countries and upon various immigrant groups who chose to come to America. See also Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Immigration Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and Kathleen Neils Conzen *et al.*, "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, 1 (Fall 1992): 3-63.

7 For a demographic breakdown of contemporary American Jews, see Barry Kosmin *et al. Highlights of the Council of Jewish Federations 1990 National Population Survey* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991). When asked whether their families were of Sephardi or Ashkenazi descent, 8% of respondents identified themselves as Sephardi. Of the remaining 92%, many were unfamiliar with the terms, but 50-60% volunteered "Eastern European origins." It is difficult to ascertain precise figures comparing the number of Eastern European and German-born Jews in America at the turn of the century. A population census undertaken by the Baron de Hirsch Fund between 1890 and 1893, focusing on the Lower East Side, reveals the extent to which Eastern European Jews predominated in the district. When asked what language they spoke, 7,084 respondents answered German, and 26,247 said they used either Russian or Yiddish. See Lloyd P. Gartner, "The Jews of New York's East Side, 1890-1893: Two Surveys by the Baron de Hirsch Fund," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, March 1964, 270. Because German and Eastern European Jews have intermarried throughout the generations, the distinctions between the groups are less clear than they once were. What is clear from the Council's figures is that a majority of Jews in America today continue to identify themselves as being of Eastern European descent.

their own synagogues.[8] Only in the late nineteenth century would New York become the unparalleled center of Jewish life in America, when masses of Eastern European immigrants arrived. The Eldridge Street Synagogue emerged as the most powerful and influential religious institution founded by this group.

Until 1825, there was only one synagogue in New York City, the Mill Street building of Congregation Shearith Israel (1730),[9] where Sephardic rituals were observed.[10] In 1825, the first Ashkenazi congregation, B'nai Jeshurun, was founded in lower Manhattan by a group of English and Dutch members who broke away from Shearith Israel.[11] By 1846 the Bohemian congregation Ahawath Chesed (Love of Mercy) began worshipping on Ludlow Street. Over the next thirty years, with the great influx of German immigrants, several German Reform congregations, including Temple Emanu-El (1845), Ansche Chesed (1850), and Rodeph Sholem (1853), built synagogues on the Lower East Side. Ahawath Chesed merged with German congregation Shaar Hashomayim (Gate of Heaven), hired Henry Fernbach, and built what became known as Central Synagogue[12] on 55th Street and Lexington Avenue in 1872.

Each of these congregations made a significant contribution to the development of Reform and, later, Conservative Judaism in America. By the turn of the century all had vacated their early synagogues, taking part in a German Jewish exodus uptown. Of these early structures,

---

8 Hyman Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947).

9 Congregation Shearith Israel, today known also as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, occupied a no-longer-extant building on Mill Street as early as 1682. The congregation built their own synagogue nearby in 1730, rebuilt there in 1818, relocated to Crosby Street in 1854, and moved to 19th Street and Fifth Avenue in 1860. In 1897 Shearith Israel relocated to a new building at 8 West 70th Street, where they continue to worship today. See *Congregation Shearith Israel, Consecration Service*, May 19, 1897, New York: Congregation Shearith Israel.

10 Sephardim are descended from those who lived, in the medieval period, in the Mediterranean and the Levant. Ashkenazi Jews most often have roots in Central and Eastern Europe. Differences between the two groups include use of the Ladino language by Sephardim and Yiddish by (mainly Eastern European) Ashkenazim, as well as differences in laws, liturgical practices, customs, methods of study, foodways, musical traditions and the pronunciation of Hebrew. For subtler distinctions between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews, see Alan Unterman, *Jews: The Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 211.

11 B'nai Jeshurun's first home was on Elm Street. The congregation occupied three other buildings, moving gradually uptown, before building their present synagogue on West 88th Street in 1918.

12 *Central Synagogue: Guide to the Archives* (New York: Central Synagogue Archives, 1994), 1-4. Eldridge Street follows Central Synagogue as the synagogue in New York City with the longest history of continuous use by one congregation.

only two still stand. Both have suffered extensive structural damage, much of their original ornamentation has been destroyed, and only one is used as a house of worship.[13]

Russian Jews, who would come to form the majority of American Jews by 1910, began arriving in New York in small numbers after 1848.[14] Four years later, Beth Hamedrash ("House of Study"), the first Eastern European congregation, composed of Russian and Polish Jews, began meeting in the garret of 83 Bayard Street on the Lower East Side.[15] This congregation spawned two of the most powerful, sizable and influential Jewish communities on the East Side: Beth Hamedrash Hagodol ("Great House of Study"), which purchased a Methodist Church on Norfolk Street in 1885, and Kahal Adath Jeshurun ("Community of the People of Israel"), which built the Eldridge Street Synagogue in 1887.

LANDSMANSCHAFTEN AND THE NEW URBAN SYNAGOGUE

The mother congregation, Beth Hamedrash, was in many ways typical of congregations on the Lower East Side toward the turn of the twentieth century. During this period it was common for small, informal groups to gather three times a day for prayer meetings in converted churches, courtyards, rented storefronts, or other ad hoc spaces known as *shtieblach* (small rooms). These spaces were not originally built to serve the religious needs of Jewish communities. Throughout the 1850s, Beth Hamedrash, with its ever-increasing membership, moved from one rented space to another, including the first floor of a building under a carpenter's shop and several former courthouses, before purchasing the former Welsh Chapel in 1856.[16]

What distinguished Beth Hamedrash from the numerous congregations on the Lower East Side was its inclusion of Jews from across Eastern Europe, with no differentiations based upon an individual's town of origin. Ashkenazim from all over the world shared values and beliefs as articulated in the scriptures, yet their *minhag* (customs and rituals), foodways, musical interpretations of prayers, even their spoken Yiddish, could vary dramatically from town to town. Many Lower East Side congregations, such as the Bialystoker Synagogue,

---

[13] The two surviving synagogues built by German Jews are the original Ansche Chesed building at 172 Norfolk Street and the Rodeph Sholem site at 8 Clinton Street. The Ansche Chesed building is the oldest standing synagogue structure in New York City, but it has not been used as a synagogue since 1975; today it serves as an artist's loft. Rodeph Sholem's 8 Clinton Street site suffered badly in an 1887 fire. The Congregation rebuilt and sold the building to the Polish congregation Chasam Sopher in 1891. The building has since undergone many exterior and interior modifications. See Wolfe and Fine, 70-71, 96-97. Also see Congregation Rodeph Sholom, "History of the Congregation Rodeph Sholom of New York," in *Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary*, 1892.

[14] Howe, 2-36.

[15] In 1850, there were still no Eastern European congregations or synagogues in New York City. See Eisenstein, 64, and Grinstein, *The Rise*, 472-474 for a list of congregations, their incorporation date and countries of origin. Grinstein estimates the number of Jews in New York in 1850 at 16,000. His figures are based on a combination of ownership of synagogue seats and purchase of matzo during Passover. They thus overlook less observant Jews living in the city at the time.

[16] Addresses for Beth Hamedrash are as follows: 83 Bayard Street, 1852; Elm and Canal, later that year; Pearl and Centre, 1853-1856; 78 Allen Street, 1856-1859. See Eisenstein, 64-65.

whose members came from the Polish town of Bialystok, used the synagogue as a space to reconnect with and support *landsmen*, men and women who came from the same towns in Europe.[17]

Beth Hamedrash and its offspring were different. These congregations allowed new relationships to form between Jews who came from diverse cultural backgrounds and who were, for the first time, worshipping together in New York. They were urban, cosmopolitan congregations, distinct from the more familial, club-like *landsmanschaften*. Still, their experiment in American religious life was not without conflict and tension, for every aspect of ritual practice, from the most routine to the monumental, was subject to debate and dissent.

MERGERS AND SCHISMS

In the course of redefining how Judaism would be practiced in their new country, Jewish immigrant communities in New York continually shifted alliances as new rules were written and rewritten. This contrasted with the situation in Eastern Europe, where each region had a chief rabbi who was responsible for setting policies and making decisions on subtle and complicated religious matters. In America, members of *landsmanschaften* congregations could look to the chief rabbi of their home town for guidance.[18] Members of Beth Hamedrash, however, could not look to a single source of religious authority. Congregants from Vilna, Warsaw, Galicia, and Lithuania had to work together to carve out their own solutions to new problems in a new democratic land.[19] In fact, the Eldridge Street congregation, which would come to be known as Kahal Adath Jeshurun, was created out of tensions around issues of religious authority at Beth Hamedrash.

Three years after Beth Hamedrash moved into the chapel at Allen Street, the congregation's leader, Rabbi Abraham Joseph Ash, and its *parnas* (president), Mr. Rothstein, argued over who had been responsible for acquiring the new space. What may have begun as a trivial disagreement between two individuals grew into a factious debate. Members sided with either the rabbi or the president as the "official" authority in the congregation. After an American court rejected Rabbi Ash's legal attempts to oust Mr. Rothstein in 1859, the rabbi's supporters broke away from Beth Hamedrash to found Beth Hamedrash Hagodol.[20]

---

17 Jeffrey Gurock, "A Stage in the Emergence of the Americanized Synagogue among East European Jews: 1890-1910," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 9, 2 (Spring 1990): 7.

18 B'nai Jeshurun turned to the Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazim in London for answers to obscure religious questions. See Israel Goldstein, ed., *Ritual Questions Discussed in Correspondence Between Rev. Solomon Herschell, Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazim in England and Congregation B'nai Jeshurun of New York* (New York, n.d., reprinted 1929).

19 See Howe, 127, for a discussion of the problem of leadership in the Jewish immigrant community. The crisis of authority is also explored in Hyman Grinstein, "Communal and Social Aspects of American Jewish History," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 39 (1950): 272-273, and Abraham Karp, "New York Chooses a Chief Rabbi," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 44 (1954): 137.

20 This was not the last dispute that led to splits in the Beth Hamedrash congregation. In 1853, Rabbi Ash and a baker named Judah Middleman disagreed over who should be appointed the congregation's ritual slaughterer. The religious authorities in Rabbi Ash's native country, Russia, upheld one

Beth Hamedrash Hagodol left the Welsh Chapel to the continued use of the Beth Hamedrash remnant group. They moved to three more spaces before settling in 1885 in a former Methodist Church on Norfolk Street, where they continue to meet today.[21]

President Rothstein's advocates remained at Allen Street. They retained the name Beth Hamedrash for approximately thirty years.[22] In 1886, they began to build a synagogue on Eldridge Street, the first built expressly for Jewish religious purposes by Eastern European immigrants on the Lower East Side.[23]

The decision to follow the president rather than the rabbi was one that would mark the character of the Eldridge Street congregants and symbolize the choices they would make over the next decades. Increasingly, the Eldridge Street congregation would experiment with new modes of synagogue leadership and set new standards for social and religious status within the Orthodox community. The Synagogue became, in Jeffrey Gurock's phrase, "the proto-Americanized synagogue ...the synagogue that best typifies this signal stage in the evolution of the twentieth-century synagogue."[24] With its emphasis on lay leadership, its highly visible and opulent new building, and its continuing commitment to traditional religious practices, the congregation at Eldridge Street was well-positioned to fulfill the socio-religious needs of first-generation worshippers.

BUILDING AN IDENTITY

---

candidate, while Middleman's authorities in Galicia supported another. Middleman and his followers withdrew from Beth Hamedrash and formed a congregation that would later be known as the Kalvarier Synagogue at 15 Pike Street. In 1861, Beth Hamedrash Hagodol experienced a one-year schism when members characterized as the "Hasidic" faction moved to 21 Delancey Street to worship in a manner that relied less on scholarship and more on direct, emotional communication with G-d. The group returned to Beth Hamedrash Hagodol during Passover of 1862. See Eisenstein, 65-67, 69; Wolfe and Fine, 90-91.

21 After seceding in 1859, Beth Hamedrash Hagodol moved to the top floor of a building at Forsyth and Grand Streets, relocated to a former courthouse at Clinton and Grand in 1865, and then moved to 69 Ludlow Street (possibly a synagogue they built, though it is no longer standing) in 1872. Ahawath Chesed, the Bohemian congregation later known as Central Synagogue, was also located at 69 Ludlow as early as 1846 and moved to Lexington Avenue and 55th Street by 1872. See Eisenstein, 71; Grinstein, *The Rise*, 473; Wolfe and Fine, 22.

22 They formally adopted the name Kahal Adath Jeshurun, which they had used informally since 1884, in 1890. New York Court of Common Pleas, *Application to Change Corporate Name*, `The Trustees of Congregation Beth Hamedrash' to `Kahal Adath Jeshurun,' April 22, 1890.

23 A reporter at the consecration ceremonies of the Eldridge Street Synagogue would comment, "As one by one the German congregations remove, the Russians take their place, and bid faith `to hold the fort' for generations to come, if emigration continues at its present magnitude." *The Jewish Messenger*, September 9, 1887.

24 Gurock, 9, 21.

In the community of Eastern European congregations on the Lower East Side, Beth Hamedrash was path-breaking. For generations many substantial congregations had settled on the Lower East Side in converted church spaces. They, too, may have wanted to build their own synagogues; but only the Eldridge Street group had the combination of financial assets, institutional connections and determination to erect a new Jewish structure in America.

A number of specific factors contributed to the congregants' decision to build. When the Second Avenue elevated line was erected in 1879, the Allen Street property was deprived of air, light, and quiet.[25] The congregation was growing rapidly in the 1880s, bolstered by a merger with Congregation Holche Josher Wizaner ("Those Who Walk in Righteousness") some time between 1884 and 1886. They would soon outgrow their quarters. The move to Eldridge Street was, on one level then, a practical necessity.

However, there were more complex reasons to build: the Eldridge Street Synagogue would serve to distinguish the Beth Hamedrash congregation from German Reform Jews and also showcase the congregation to the multitudes of poorer Eastern Europeans arriving on the Lower East Side each day; the Eldridge Street Synagogue, a new American institution, could help Eastern European Jews create a distinct American identity.

In 1885 the Pittsburgh Platform had formalized the practices Reform leaders had advocated since the mid-nineteenth century. Reform adherents deemphasized Sabbath observance and the rules of *kashruth* (commandments relating to dietary practices), allowed men and women to sit together during religious worship, rewrote the standard prayer book, introduced the organ in religious services, and allowed women to come to the Torah for confirmation services. These adjustments, it was felt by traditional practitioners, would inevitably lead to the "disintegration of the Jews."[26]

German Jews had been in New York since the 1840s and had built a number of impressive synagogue structures, first on the Lower East Side and later uptown. German Jews were frequently ambivalent in their attitude toward the Eastern European immigrants,[27] but they

---

[25] As evidence of their political sophistication, the congregation filed a successful suit against the Manhattan Railway Company and Metropolitan Elevated Railway Company in February 1889. The congregation requested $5,000 for damages and loss of income as a result of the new `el.' The judgment, rendered by Leonard A. Giegerich a full ten years later, awarded the congregation $1,218.88 for damages, interest and legal costs. "The Trustees of the Congregation Beth Hamedrash against the Manhattan Railway Company," etc., New York Supreme Court Law Judgment, 1899-390, NYCC Division of Old Records.

[26] Joselit, 3.

[27] Stephen Birmingham records that the Germans provided consistent financial and social support to the Eastern Europeans through their settlement houses and charitable societies, but they were fueled by a desire to transform these "`wild Asiatics'....to clean the immigrants up, dust them off and get them to behave and look as much like Americans as possible." *Our Crowd* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 345, 347. An example of this condescending attitude can be found in a review of the Eldridge Street opening ceremonies, in which the author comments upon the indecorous behavior of congregants. He concludes that they are too comfortable at the synagogue because they visit so frequently (as opposed to the Sabbath-only Reform Jews) that the *shul* feels like a "second home." See Yodka, 4. *Shul* is literally "school," but it is used colloquially as a

did provide the Eastern Europeans with a positive model of Jewish-American behavior. In their philanthropic activities, the German Jews were magnanimous and highly visible, and their synagogues were elegant and refined. The Eldridge Street congregants hoped that their new synagogue building would equal the physical splendor of Central Synagogue or Temple Emanu-El and at the same time communicate the social and economic prestige of its Eastern European founders.

Another pressing reason to build was the need to situate the Beth Hamedrash congregants among the influx of Eastern Europeans on the Lower East Side. Tens of thousands of new immigrants were arriving in New York each year.[28] The congregation could either find ways to appeal to them and, more important, their children, or risk losing these potential congregants to the Reform synagogues uptown or to secular affiliations.[29] The attention garnered by an opulent new building might well serve to establish the prominence of the congregation and help the congregation reach out to newcomers.

Having been the Jewish minority in the 1850s, a small group of Eastern European Jews amid the more confident Jews of New York's *Kleindeutschland*, Beth Hamedrash was by the 1880s one of the two oldest, richest, and most firmly ensconced congregations on the East Side. After thirty-odd years in a recycled chapel, the congregation was confident enough to undertake the construction of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, a building that would be vibrant, inviting, and also relevant to the American context. When these Eastern European Jews built their own enormous, highly decorated synagogue, they asserted their strong presence in the network of New York City religious institutions.

DEMOCRACY AND DECORUM

The Eldridge Street Synagogue, constructed in one year and completed in time for High Holiday services in 1887,[30] was built in response to internal growth, the impact of the Reform movement, and a claim to personal and institutional leadership among the community of Eastern European Jews. In the new building, congregants would selectively borrow patterns and practices of the reformers, modifying them to work in harmony with more traditional customs, and passing them along to the constantly renewed membership.

At the opening ceremonies, the Synagogue towered high above the surrounding tenement houses. Its expansive, monumental structure, elaborately carved woodwork, glistening brass fixtures and luminous stained glass windows stood as physical proof that Orthodoxy and American luxury were not incompatible. The building so closely resembled the architectural

---

synonym for synagogue.

[28] Howe, p. 4. Historians and immigration statistics both point to 1881, a year of particularly devastating pogroms in Russia, as a watershed.

[29] See Joselit, pp. 3-5, on decorum and civility. See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

[30] It is likely that the funds to build the synagogue ($19,000 according to the *Jewish Messenger*) were derived from the sale of the Allen Street property, as well as from private donations by members, and that a certain amount of work was contributed *pro bono* by contractors with ties of indebtedness to synagogue leaders.

style and design of Temple Emanu-el that architectural historians have often viewed it as a direct response to aesthetic standards set by the uptown crowd.[31]

The challenge facing Beth Hamedrash was how to emulate the aesthetic of the German Reform synagogues and still articulate distinct liturgical and cultural practices. In this period, "Reform" and "Orthodox" groups both struggled with questions of continuity and change, preservation and adaptation, and they were, in some cases, arriving at similar conclusions. During this transition, a spectrum of opinions existed within both groups. Even so, the Eastern Europeans perceived the German congregations as monolithic, potentially more appealing to Jews in America, and therefore a threat.

At the opening of the new synagogue on Eldridge Street, standing before its fort-like walls, Rabbi Bernard Drachman warned congregants to "make a battlement for the roof of their house... otherwise they might stand before their mirrors some morning and not recognize themselves as orthodox any more, when reform had taken them by surprise."[32] Drachman saw the construction of the Eldridge Street Synagogue as an active assertion of Orthodox identity in an age of religious ferment.

Another speaker at the event, Shearith Israel's Rabbi Pereira Mendes, also saw a link between physical beauty and the maintenance of traditional religious practices. As his biographer put it, Mendes believed that "beauty and outward form and decorum were essential if Orthodoxy was to maintain itself, and retain the loyalties of its youth." Mendes thought children should be instructed in Jewish religion and history or else "in growing up" they would "leave the synagogue and join the temples uptown."[33]

Other contemporary observers viewed the new building differently. Ish Yemini, writing about the dedication ceremony, deplored the use of aesthetic grandeur, asking, "Is this the orthodoxy which we should strive to bequeath to our children, a Judaism composed of carved wood and ornamented bricks covered up by a handsome mortgage?"[34]

---

31 Giorgio Cavaglieri and Beth Sullebarger, *Historic Structures Report*, Eldridge Street Synagogue, March 1986, 18.

32 Rabbi Drachman would later become a well-known advocate for the use of English in religious services as a key to Jewish survival. He is quoted in Yodka, 4. By 1906, another observer noted that, because young people were going to college and "acquiring a taste for the beautiful and the decorous," they could not help but compare the "beauty and dignity maintained in the Christian Church and even in the Reformed Temples ...to the detriment of the down-town Synagogues." The writer felt that young people perceived the latter as "primitive, untutored, undignified, and un-American." See Elias Solomon, "Down-town Synagogues: Lecture Delivered before Senior Class of Seminary, Tuesday, March 20, 1906, Course on Philanthropy and Communal Work," Elias Solomon Collection, Jewish Theological Seminary Archives, New York, New York.

33 See Eugene Markovitz, "Henry Pereira Mendes: Architect of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, n.d., 370, and Yodka, p. 4. It should be noted that neither Drachman nor Mendes were Lower East Siders or Eastern European; they did, however, share some of the community's concerns (another reminder that the lines between movements were permeable and imprecise).

34 Ish Yemini, "Dedication of Congregation Adath Jeshurun," *American Hebrew*, September 9, 1887, 70. Moses Weinberger, a visiting rabbi from Hungary, had

Obviously the Eldridge Street congregants did not agree. Without forsaking their traditions and beliefs, they set out to show that they could be observant Jews and also American consumers. At the turn of the century, just as the nation was defining a middle-class culture which took its identity from its ability to acquire objects,[35] the Eldridge Street congregation began to associate American identity with prosperity. By displaying wealth in their impressive house of worship, they could maintain traditional practices and also follow the American pattern.

However, with the opening of the new building came new financial responsibilities. The congregation had to ensure that it could raise sufficient operating funds. Fortunately, they had a core group of affluent members. Not all of those who were active in the building of the Eldridge Street Synagogue and its institutional life fit the stereotype of poor "huddled masses." Individuals such as Alexander (Sender) Jarmulowsky, a prominent banker, Isaac Gellis, a kosher provisions entrepreneur, and David Cohen, a real estate magnate, had been part of Beth Hamedrash since the 1870s, and had amassed substantial money, influence, and political know-how. In fact, their success may have encouraged new immigrants hoping to make a similar mark in America.[36]

Alongside these prosperous businessmen were poorer immigrants just arriving and carving out lives in America. The more affluent members of the congregation shared their space with the bricklayers, junk dealers, and longshoremen of the congregation, and with the less fortunate individuals seeking free matzo or free meat for the Passover holidays. The Eldridge Street Synagogue became a place for interaction between Jews of diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.[37] While the tinsmith and the banker may have passed one another on the streets of the Lower East Side, at Eldridge Street they had the opportunity to pray together, share a toast during the Sabbath *kiddush*, and receive help in times of grief or financial distress.[38]

---

a similar reaction. See Jonathan D. Sarna, ed. and trans., *People Who Walk on Their Heads: Moses Weinberger's Jews and Judaism in New York* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., 1981).

35 See Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Andrew K. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Eastern European Jews and Urban Consumption in America, 1880-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

36 Gurock, 10-11; *Minute Books*; plus "David Cohen Dead," *New York Times*, April 19, 1911; "Reb David Cohen, May He Rest In Peace," *The Morning Journal*, April 21, 1911; Elias Cohen, Personal Correspondence, October 9, 1946, Collection of the Eldridge Street Project, New York City; "Obituary: Isaac Gellis" *The Hebrew Standard*, March 30, 1906; "Sender Jarmulowsky," *New York Times*, June 2, 1912.

37 Some of the more interesting occupations indicated in *Minute Books*, *Marriage Certificates*, and *Ledgers* of this period, representing a variety of income levels, are barrel and button maker, cutter, fire adjuster, hatter, tanner, jeweler, matrimonial agent, newsdealer, operator, peddler, restaurant keeper, salesman, silk merchant, tailor, tinsmith, truck driver, and umbrella maker.

38 The synagogue's *tzedakah* (charitable acts) committee met regularly to discuss allocations of money and food. See *Minute Books*, including Jarmulowsky's donations of matzo and meat to the poor (1891, 1892); lending of money to poor (1895); lending of money to needy brother (1896); each member can nominate

It is tempting to construct an image of the Eldridge Street congregation as tolerant, inclusive and welcoming. There is, however, insufficient evidence to support the idea that impoverished immigrants were treated as equals of the congregation's wealthy movers and shakers. Congregational records reveal that the group was mainly composed of small and large businessmen and a few laborers.[39] The more affluent members of the congregation were given positions of authority which enabled them to set policies around issues of decorum, qualifications for membership, and charity for the poor. The quality of the interaction between wealthy and poor remains unclear, and it is impossible to reconfigure synagogue seating patterns that may have been defined by class.[40]

Regardless of whether inter-class participation at Eldridge Street indicates an egalitarian attitude or simple resignation to the changing demographics of the neighborhood, it is true that Jews from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds came to the synagogue to pray. They were united by a belief in the economic opportunities America presented and by an adherence to traditional precepts of Judaism. In their new urban synagogue, the Eldridge Street congregants were willing to forsake certain local Eastern European variations in practice, but they stood strong against what they perceived to be the more radical adjustments and encroachments of the Reform Jews. For example, in 1887, a contract for the purchase of synagogue seats set forth the congregation's intention to "preserve, maintain and adhere to the Orthodox faith." If, at any time in the future, the congregation were to use an organ during the service, allow men and women to sit together, or to sing together in a "mixed choir," the prospective buyer would receive twice his initial investment to compensate for the breach of faith.[41]

The congregation was traditional, religiously, but wished to project an image of a civilized, modern Eastern European Jewish community. Therefore they encouraged their members to

---

one poor person for membership (1909); establishment of Free Loan Fund (1912); brother in bad financial situation can remain member (1913), etc. For comparative instances of charity during Passover, see Beth Hamedrash Hagodol, *Passover Relief Committee, 1915*, Jewish Division, New York Public Library.

39 See Gartner. The Baron de Hirsch Fund study reports a higher ratio of workers to business owners than that present at Eldridge Street. Based on a unscientific sampling of congregational records, business owners outnumbered laborers such as longshoremen by a significant percentage.

40 Membership was a financial investment that could cost an individual anywhere from $150-$500 per year. Payment entitled a congregant to a seat in the shul, the chance to vote in and attend meetings, visits during sickness, and funeral and burial rites. Congregants could vote on nominations for rabbis, cantors, officers of the synagogue, amendments to the constitution, and on all charity gifts above ten dollars. All decisions were made by a democratic majority or two-thirds vote. Membership is a subject on which there is limited comparative data, so we cannot assert that the Eldridge Street policies are unique. Also, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between annual dues, seat prices, and High Holiday ticket prices. No one, however, would have been turned away at the door because they could not afford to pay. See *Constitution*, *Minute Books*, and oral history interview, Judge Paul P.E. Bookson. Also see Gurock, 10.

41 Congregation Beth Hamedrash, *Contract for Sale of Seats*, 1887, Collection of Eldridge Street Project, New York, New York. An earlier lawsuit against the congregation B'nai Jeshurun might have been the impetus for inserting such cautionary language. See Jonathan Sarna, "The Debate Over Mixed Seating," in Wertheimer, 372-378.

adhere to middle- class American ideas of decorum. For instance, peace and order in the synagogue were of paramount importance. The *Minute Books* cite frequent incidents and fines for interrupting the service, loud talking (especially during the reading of the Torah), late arrivals, use of base language, and spitting on the floor. To combat this last transgression, the congregation purchased dozens and dozens of spittoons between 1885 and 1909 to insure a modicum of cleanliness in the sanctuary.[42]

Restrictive measures relating to social and political processes may also have been developed to foster the image the congregation wished to display to the world at large. Ushers were appointed to supervise and fine other congregants. Board members carefully scrutinized the "moral character" of individuals nominated for synagogue membership. Following acceptance, members could be dismissed "for conduct unbecoming a member of the Congregation."[43] These rules may reveal the attitude of the more established members toward the newcomers. Perhaps, like the Germans before them, these Eastern European leaders wanted to reshape the recent arrivals in their own image.

Another response to contemporary American culture was the increased prominence given to lay leaders of the synagogue. Continuing a pattern established at the time of the 1859 rift with Beth Hamedrash Hagodol, the Eldridge Street congregants did not look to the rabbi as the ultimate authority. In fact, during the first year of operation in the new building, the congregation decided not to hire a rabbi at all in order to save money. Throughout the synagogue's history, the rabbi served a limited and erratic function.[44] From a liturgical perspective, rabbis were not essential as prayer leaders since most men over the age of thirteen had sufficient knowledge of the Torah to conduct or follow services. In numerous other ways, lay leaders like the congregation's president retained prominent roles.[45]

---

[42] See *Minute Books*: Establishment of Peace Committee to "resolve problems" (1891); incidents of disturbing the peace (1893); David Cohen threatens to leave synagogue because he feels slighted (1896); rules are printed to maintain order in synagogue (1897); fines for unruly behavior (1898); a member is fined for creating a disturbance in the shul (1915). Also see Joselit, 36-38; Gurock, 12-13. See *Ledgers and Account Books*, 1885-1909, for money spent on spittoons. The congregation spent $5.00 on spittoons in 1885 and 1888, $14.40 in 1884-85, and $10.80 in 1909. For $7.20 in 1901, they received four dozen spittoons. For material on system of fines and banishment, see *Constitution of the Congregation Kahal Adas Jeshurun with Anshei Lubtz*, June 22, 1913, New York City.

[43] The *Contract for Sale of Seats* stipulates that people purchasing seats must "adhere strictly to the rules for maintaining peace and order of the service."

[44] Over twenty-one different rabbinical figures were associated with the synagogue between 1890 and 1914. See *Minute Books*.

[45] Often the president, and not the rabbi, was called upon to make the most important decisions. For example, Rabbi Moshe Mordecai Rivkind's contract with the synagogue stipulated that he could not discuss "matters pertaining to the state without the permission of the president." His successor was not permitted to discuss political matters without the permission of the president. In the matter of granting a divorce, the preacher had to have the permission of the president. See Gurock, 18. Speaking to both the president's significance and the question of appearances, in 1894 the trustee R. Shmuel Berenstein was asked by the president of the congregation to stop shaving his beard "because it is not appropriate that a person who shaves should assume a role of leadership and stand at the Sefer Torah." See *Minute Books*.

The emphasis on lay leadership may have reflected the congregation's adoption of the American value of "ambition:" the idea of getting-ahead, the opportunity for people with sufficient drive (and, frequently, cash) to secure positions of authority.

Given that the congregation was deeply invested in making a public impression of respectability and affluence, it was also logical that the cantor was elevated above the rabbi. Hiring a well-regarded cantor could help establish the congregation's elite image; indirectly, it could also serve their bank account. Virtuosic cantors were a "magnetic attraction" to new affluent members.[46] In the synagogue's opening year, the group voted to spend $5,000 to recruit cantor Pinchas Minkowsky and his choir from Odessa, Russia. Because of the building's fine acoustics, the emphasis given to the cantor is somewhat understandable. Even so, this was, according to one 1901 observer, "the largest price ever paid [for a cantor] by any East Side congregation."[47]

Even as the Eldridge Street congregation sought to create a singular and prestigious identity, they maintained their commitment to the ongoing strength of the Orthodox community as a whole. Like their peers, they worried that the fragmentation of Orthodox congregations would sap energy and give outsiders the impression of chaos and disunity. Just as the Eldridge Street Synagogue was becoming a visible force in the neighborhood, the larger Orthodox community was launching an effort to recruit a Chief Rabbi for New York City.[48] It was hoped that the Chief Rabbi would help solidify and strengthen the seemingly vulnerable Orthodox movement in a way that would, as stated in the 1888 mission paper of the Association of the American Hebrew Orthodox Congregations, "prove that also in America can be combined honor, enlightenment and culture, with a proper observance of religious duty ... to keep the next generation faithful to Judaism in spite of educational, social and business influences."[49]

Congregation Kahal Adath Jeshurun committed $300 to the recruitment fund[50] and vied to serve as the home base for the Chief Rabbi. While that campaign was unsuccessful, the congregation did have a moment of particular prominence in 1896 when it hosted the first, organizing meeting of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America.[51]

INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In 1886 the founders of the Eldridge Street Synagogue had no reason to believe that the Lower East Side would cease to be home to the largest Jewish population in the world. They could not predict that their membership would precipitously decline starting in the

---

46 Eisenstein, 73.

47 *Ibid.*, 73-74.

48 The experiment was ultimately deemed a failure. Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna had the right scholarly credentials, but complicated institutional politics, labor issues, consumer economics and rivalries between Litvaks and Galicians worked against him. See Karp, *New York Chooses*, 129-198.

49 *Ibid.*, 136.

50 It should be noted that Sender Jarmulowsky was Treasurer of the Association.

51 The organization was formed to "protest against declarations of Reform rabbis." See Markovitz, 375.

1930s.[52] By the 1950s, the much-reduced group relocated from the main sanctuary, which was too expensive to heat and maintain, to the Synagogue's basement-level smaller sanctuary. Beginning in the late 1970s, after the main sanctuary had suffered decades of neglect, volunteers and then a formal not-for-profit organization took on the task of rescuing and preserving the historic building.

Under the auspices of the Eldridge Street Project, which works to restore the building to its original grandeur, and the congregation Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz, the Eldridge Street Synagogue is both a continuing house of worship and a cultural center. That the Synagogue still functions, and has always functioned, as a religious building, adds to its vitality and meaning.[53]

The enthusiastic response from both Jews and non-Jews to Eldridge Street Project-sponsored tours, workshops and interpretive programs attests to the power of the building to educate and inspire. Between 12,000 and 15,000 national and international visitors come to the site each year; approximately 5,000 of them are school children from the New York area who come for special programs focusing on architecture, immigration and Jewish history. Supporters of the Eldridge Street Project include 13,000 annual donors from across the country.

The Eldridge Street Synagogue remains remarkably intact and largely unaltered. Today, the Synagogue's presence in a richly textured, multi-ethnic neighborhood, and its weekly Sabbath services, offer continued testimony to the principles of ethnic diversity and religious freedom so integral to our national identity.

CONCLUSION

---

[52] Limitations on immigration quotas beginning in the early 1920s, the extension of public transportation systems, and the development of middle-income housing in the outer boroughs would all have an impact on the demographics of the Lower East Side. Following the Irish and Germans before them, many of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants would leave the tenement district, moving uptown and beyond in search of better homes and neighborhoods when their incomes made this possible. Reflecting the trend, in 1909 a splinter group of the Eldridge Street Congregation broke off to form a Harlem branch near their new homes. In the same year, possibly in response to the decrease in membership, Kahal Adath Jeshurun was enlarged by the addition of another congregation, known as Anshe Lubtz. They changed their name to Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz. See *Minute Books* (1909). For a broad discussion of national trends toward suburbanization, see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 185. Jackson points out that the population of the Lower East Side was 398,000 in 1910, 303,000 in 1920, 182,000 in 1930, and 147,000 in 1940.

[53] The continuing religious life of the Eldridge Street Synagogue sets it apart from certain historic structures that predate it. The Lloyd Street Synagogue in Baltimore, Maryland (1845), Congregation Mickve Israel in Savannah, Georgia (1876), and Adas Israel in Washington, D.C. (1878) are all used as Jewish "museums." Their congregations have relocated. Charter Oak Temple in Hartford, CT (1876) functions as an arts and culture center. The congregation of Reform Temple Beth Elohim in Brooklyn (1876) has relocated; its original building is today a Hasidic day school for girls.

The Eldridge Street Synagogue is the only surviving religious artifact to illuminate the spiritual and cultural lives of Eastern European immigrants in the neighborhood that was the cradle of American Jewish civilization. The Synagogue and the experience of its founding generation represent a crucial moment in the development of Judaism in America. At Eldridge Street, these early Orthodox congregants created a new social and religious identity, responding in part to subsequent waves of poorer immigrants and to the perceived challenges posed by Jewish reformers. They struggled to maintain traditional practices in a new land, and worked to transform the synagogue into an American institution.[54]

For the founders, the new synagogue at Eldridge Street, with its ornate Moorish architectural style, rules of decorum, and highbrow cantorial concerts, was a compromise between their commitment to traditional liturgical and ritual observance and American modes of institutional organization, political systems, and markers of social status.[55] Newer Jewish immigrants to America, who came to the space seeking divine inspiration, Yiddish conversation, and a sense of community, could look to the monumental structure for evidence of what was possible in a new land, and they could be inspired by what Jews had already achieved. The building "raised immigrant self-esteem" and helped Jewish immigrants assert their commitment to becoming American.[56]

The story of the Eldridge Street Synagogue is central to American and American Jewish history. No other historic site in America more powerfully communicates the stirring saga of the complex exchange between traditional forms of Judaism and American culture.

---

[54] The broad history of the congregation at Eldridge Street can be constructed through exploration of the following primary sources located in the Collection of the Eldridge Street Project, New York City: Minutes of Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz, 1890-1916 (*Minute Books*); Ledgers and Account Books of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, 1887-1909; Certificates of Marriage, New York State Department of Health, 1909-1926; *50th Anniversary Souvenir Journal*, 1934; *Constitution* of the Congregation Khal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubtz, 1913. For contemporary discussions of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, see Richard Wheatley, "The Jews in New York," *The Century Magazine*, January 1892, 323-342; *The Jewish Messenger*, September 9, 1887; Mi Yodka, *The American Israelite* 34, 12 (September 16, 1887) 4; J.D. Eisenstein, "The History of the First Russian-American Jewish Congregation: The Beth Hamedrosh Hagadol," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 9 (1901), 63-74.

[55] Jonathan Sarna refers to the increased attention to appearances (i.e., how the religion and its practitioners looked and acted) as a shift from "participation to performance." *People Walk*, 13.

[56] *Ibid.*, 12.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Architects' and Builders' Record and Guide. "Building for Investment in the Lower Part of New York City," *Architects' and Builders' Record and Guide. Supplement.* 69 (January 4, 1902).

Cleghorn, Kate. "Foreign Immigration Into the United States." In Robert W. DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, *The Tenement House Problem: Including the Report of the New York State Tenement House Commission of 1900.* 2 vols. New York: Macmillan Co., 1903.

Cohen, Elias. Personal Correspondence, October 9, 1946. Collection of the Eldridge Street Project.

Congregation Beth Hamedrash. *Contract for Sale of Seats.* 1887. Collection of Eldridge Street Project, New York, NY.

Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagodol. *Passover Relief Committee.* 1915. Jewish Division, New York Public Library.

Congregation Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz. *Constitution.* June 22, 1913. Collection of the Eldridge Street Project.

_____. *Minute Books*, 1890-1916. Collection of the Eldridge Street Project.

_____. *Ledgers and Account Books.* 1887-1909. Collection of the Eldridge Street Project.

_____. *50th Anniversary Souvenir Journal.* 1934. Collection of the Eldridge Street Project.

Congregation Rodeph Sholom. "History of the Congregation Rodeph Sholom of New York." In *Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary*, 1892. Jewish Division of the New York Public Library.

Congregation Shearith Israel. *Consecration Service, May 19, 1897.* Jewish Division, New York Public Library.

"David Cohen Dead." *New York Times*, April 19, 1911.

Eisenstein, J.D. "The History of the First Russian-American Jewish Congregation: The Beth Hamedrosh Hagadol." *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 9 (1901), pp. 63-74.

Gartner, Lloyd P. "The Jews of New York's East Side, 1890-1893: Two Surveys by the Baron de Hirsch Fund." *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (March 1964), 264-281.

Goldstein, Israel, ed. *Ritual Questions Discussed in Correspondence Between Rev. Solomon Herschell, Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazim in England and Congregation B'nai Jeshurun of New York.* New York, n.d. Reprint: 1929.

The Jewish Messenger, September 9, 1887, n.p.

New York Court of Common Pleas. *Application to Change Corporate Name*, `The Trustees of Congregation Beth Hamedrash' to `Kahal Adath Jeshurun.' April 22, 1890.

New York State Department of Health. Certificates of Marriage, Eldridge Street Synagogue, 1909-1926.

"Obituary: Isaac Gellis." *The Hebrew Standard*, March 30, 1906.

"Reb David Cohen, May He Rest In Peace." *The Morning Journal*, April 21, 1911.

"Sender Jarmulowsky." *New York Times*, June 2, 1912.

Solomon, Elias. "Down-town Synagogues: Lecture Delivered before Senior Class of Seminary, Tuesday, March 20, 1906, Course on Philanthropy and Communal Work." Elias Solomon Collection, Jewish Theological Seminary Archives, New York, NY.

"The Trustees of the Congregation Beth Hamedrash against the Manhattan Railway Company," etc. New York Supreme Court Law Judgment, 1899-390. New York City Division of Old Records.

Wheatley, Richard. "The Jews in New York." *The Century Magazine*, January 1892, pp. 323-342.

Yemini, Ish. "Dedication of Congregation Adath Jeshurun." *American Hebrew*, September 9, 1887, 70.

Yodka, Mi. *The American Israelite* 34, 12 (September 16, 1887), 4.

INTERVIEW

Interview with Judge Paul P.E. Bookson by Beth Edberg, New York, NY, 1991. Collection of the Eldridge Street Project.

SECONDARY SOURCES

American History Workshop. Research and Concept Papers for Exhibition Development. New York: AHW, 1991, 1995.

Birmingham, Stephen. *Our Crowd*. New York: Doubleday, 1967.

Blumin, Stuart. *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City 1760-1900*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Bodnar, John. *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

"Central Synagogue: Guide to the Archives." New York: Central Synagogue Archives, 1994.

Conzen, Kathleen Neils et al. "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, 1 (Fall 1992).

Dwork, Deborah. "Immigrant Jews On the Lower East Side of New York: 1880-1914." In Jonathan Sarna, ed. *The American Jewish Experience*. New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1986, 102-117.

Grinstein, Hyman. *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947.

_____. "Communal and Social Aspects of American Jewish History." *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 39 (1950): 267-282.

Gurock, Jeffrey. "A Stage in the Emergence of the Americanized Synagogue among East European Jews: 1890-1910." *Journal of American Ethnic History* (Spring 1990): 7-25.

Heinze, Andrew R. *Adapting to Abundance: Eastern European Jews and Urban Consumption in America 1880-1914*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and The Life They Found and Made*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Joselit, Jenna Weissman. *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Inter-War Years*. Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1990.

Karp, Abraham. "An Eastern European Congregation on American Soil: Beth Israel, Rochester, NY, 1874-1886," in Bertram Korn, ed., *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus* (Waltham: American Jewish Historical Society, 1976), 263-302.

_____. "New York Chooses a Chief Rabbi." *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 44 (1954): 129-198.

Kosmin, Barry et al. *Highlights of the Council of Jewish Federations 1990 National Population Survey*. New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991.

Markovitz, Eugene. "Henry Pereira Mendes: Architect of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America." *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 364-384.

Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.

Rischin, Moses. *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962.

Sarna, Jonathan D., ed. *The American Jewish Experience*. New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1986.

_____. "The Debate Over Mixed Seating." In Jack Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 372-378.

_____. *People Who Walk on Their Heads: Moses Weinberger's Jews and Judaism in New York*. New York: Holmes and Meier Pub. Inc., 1981.

Unterman, Alan. *Jews: The Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

Wertheimer, Jack, ed. *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Wischnitzer, Rachel. *Synagogue Architecture in the United States. History and Interpretation*. Philadelphia, 1955.

Wolfe, Gerard and Jo Renee Fine. *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side*. New York: Washington Mews Books, 1978.

Yans-McLaughlin, Virginia. *Immigration Reconsidered*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Zipperstein, Stephen. *The Jews of Odessa, 1794-1881*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985.

ARCHITECTURAL REPORTS SPECIFIC TO THE ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE

Cavaglieri, Giorgio, and Beth Sullebarger. *Historic Structures Report, Eldridge Street Synagogue*. March 1986.

EverGreene Painting Studios. *Report on the Investigation of the Paint Finishes of the Eldridge Street Synagogue*. June 1989.

Meadows, Robert E. *Eldridge Street Synagogue Master Plan*. February 1991.

New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. *Eldridge Street Synagogue Designation Report*. 1980.

Ray, Dr. Eric. *Numbers as Symbols in the Facade of the Eldridge Street Synagogue*. TS, n.d. Collection of the Eldridge Street Project.

Stewart, John Donald. *A Programme for the Preservation of Synagogue Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz, 12-16 Eldridge Street, New York*. Master's Thesis, Historic Preservation Program, Columbia University, 1979.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

___ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
_X_ Previously Listed in the National Register: March 28, 1980 [80002687]
___ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
___ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
___ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
___ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

___ State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State Agency
___ Federal Agency
_X_ Local Government: Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, New York City
_X_ University: Jewish Theological Seminary, New York City
_X_ Other (Specify Repository): Collection of the Eldridge Street Project, New York City

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: Less than one (1) acre

UTM References:

	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	584960	4507360

Verbal Boundary Description:

The legal boundary lines as found on the Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 293, lot 3.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the original building that has historically been known as the Eldridge Street Synagogue (or the Synagogue of Congregation Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz) and which maintains historic integrity.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Renee Newman, Program Associate
Maria Schlanger, Restoration Associate
Amy E. Waterman, Executive Director
Telephone: (212) 219-0903

Date: June 1, 1995

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS SURVEY
National Park Service/Washington Office
May 10, 1996

APPENDIX A: Eldridge Street in Relation to Beth Israel

An indenture to purchase property on Eldridge Street was filed by Congregation Kahal Adath Jeshurun in May 1886. The indenture secured several lots, "each of said lots being in breadth and rear twenty feet and in depth on each side eighty seven feet," (a.k.a. 12-16 Eldridge Street). The size of the lots was appropriate for the scale to which they designed. In July 1886, the congregation filed a petition to sell the building in which they had worshipped for twenty-seven years. The sale was an indication of their confidence that the new building would soon be available.

While no extant documents can be used to date the earliest stages of planning at Eldridge Street, the fact that the congregation purchased such a large property and was prepared to sell its previous home suggests that KAJ had been planning the new synagogue for several years.[1]

Beth Israel in Rochester organized its first construction planning meeting in April 1886. The group went into construction immediately, and they opened their new synagogue in September, 1886. The building was smaller than Eldridge Street and was described at the time as "plain but good looking....without decoration." The project, for a much less complex architectural structure, took five months from conception to completion.[2]

However, the race to the finish line is less important than the broader stories with which the buildings are associated. The Rochester building can be seen as an example of the "frontier" experience faced by Jews as they spread out across the country. The Eldridge Street Synagogue, quite differently, was situated at the heart of American Jewish life, on the Lower East Side, the birthplace of American Orthodox Judaism. The neighborhood was influential, both for those who remained there and for those who ventured beyond it to all parts of the United States.

In fact, the most important element distinguishing Eldridge Street from Beth Israel may lie in the historical significance of the Lower East Side. At the moment when Eldridge Street was built, and until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, the Lower East Side was the center of Jewish life in America, housing the largest Jewish population in the world. The neighborhood was a gateway to America for Eastern Europeans who came to this country in the largest migration in human history. The Eldridge Street Synagogue was, for many new arrivals, the first American shul.

The Lower East Side, as the hub of Jewish immigrant life, offered all the institutions and amenities necessary to conduct an Orthodox Jewish life–kosher food, ritual slaughterers, educators to train young people in Torah and Talmud, *moihels* to perform circumcisions, *mikvehs* for ritual bathing–and the overarching framework to evaluate the strict level of adherence to scripture. Well-known rabbinical leaders would have been wary of life outside the metropolis, and most who came to America settled in New York, on the Lower East Side.

---

1 See Indenture, May 25, 1886, Collection of Eldridge Street Project, New York City; Petition to Sell Real Estate, Special Proceeding of the New York Supreme Court, 1886-DO-19, filed July 15, 1886.

2 See Abraham Karp, "An East European Congregation on American Soil: Beth Israel, Rochester, New York, 1874-1886," in Bertram Wallace Korn, *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus* (Waltham: American Jewish Historical Society, 1976), 263-302.

With fewer resources, the Beth Israel Congregation, like many frontier Jewish communities, always remained small. Its congregants were from the same towns in Eastern Europe, and many were members of the same family. The Eldridge Street Synagogue, by contrast, opened its doors to Orthodox Jews from numerous countries across Eastern Europe. Hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants passed through the synagogue, as they established themselves in New York or learned to practice American-style Judaism on their way to other parts of the United States.

The congregation at Eldridge Street was the first Eastern European congregation in America, organized under the name Beth Hamedrash in 1852. Its present building has served over five generations of worshippers. Beth Israel's building is months older, but its considerably younger congregation, founded in 1874, no longer worships in the building. In 1973, Beth Israel Synagogue was purchased by a small African-American Jewish congregation known as the Church of God and Saints of Christ. The structure now stands alone in a desolate urban renewal zone; the buildings that once surrounded it have been razed.[3] This is in stark contrast to the Eldridge Street Synagogue, located in a bustling Lower East Side neighborhood that continues to attract consumers, tourists, and history-seekers.

[3]The Beth Israel Synagogue is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and other than this discussion, has not been evaluated for possible NHL nomination and designation.

APPENDIX B: Eldridge Street in Relation to Other Significant American Synagogues

TOURO SYNAGOGUE, NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Touro Synagogue (1758) in Newport, Rhode Island is the only surviving synagogue from the Colonial period. The building represents early Jewish settlers in this country who came from the British West Indies colony of Barbados. The Republican style resembles eighteenth-century Congregational meeting-houses such as the Old South Meeting House in Boston (1729).[4]

Unlike Eldridge Street, which incorporates Jewish symbols such as the Star of David throughout its exterior and interior design, the Touro Synagogue does not announce itself as a Jewish institution. The Sephardic congregants, who had memories of persecution during the Spanish Inquisition, chose to be discreet about their Jewish identity in their public architectural structure. Conversely, the Eastern European immigrants at Eldridge Street, having escaped the pogroms in their homeland, consciously selected styles and motifs with no Christian connotations and boldly proclaimed their Jewish affiliation.

KAHAL KADOSH BETH ELOHIM, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Beth Elohim is the most appropriate site for comparison with the Eldridge Street Synagogue. Beth Elohim is best known as the birthplace of the Reform movement in America. One of the oldest congregations in the United States, the Sephardic group began meeting in 1749. By 1800, Charleston was a major Jewish center. Of the estimated 2,500 Jews living in the United States, 1,000 lived in South Carolina and 500 were located in Charleston.

In 1838, after their original building was destroyed in a fire, Beth Elohim began planning a new synagogue and debating changes in the religious service. Between 1840 and 1842, Reformers in Charleston advocated use of an organ during services, use of English in the synagogue, and the elimination of the rabbi and certain key prayers. Historians have argued that, while Beth Elohim Reformers may have been aware of the Reform movement in Germany, they were more directly influenced by schisms among Protestant congregations in South Carolina. In America, members of Beth Elohim observed the formation of break-away Christian religious groups who made changes in the conduct of their service without negative consequences. The Reform movement that began at Beth Elohim was a unique response to American conditions and challenges.[5]

Eldridge Street Synagogue is, in many ways, the Orthodox counterpart to Beth Elohim. The Charleston congregation was one of the oldest Sephardic groups in America, just as the Eldridge Street congregation that built Eldridge Street was the first Russian, and first Eastern European, congregation in the United States. Charleston had America's highest concentration of Jews in 1800; the Lower East Side would supplant Charleston as a center of Jewish life in the late nineteenth century when hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews entered the country and that community each year.

---

[4]Although never nominated for NHL designation, Touro Synagogue was designated as an affiliated area of the National Park System in 1946. This recognition was based on the property's architectural significance rather than its significance in the history of American Judaism.

[5] Robert Liberles, "Conflict Over Reforms: The Case of Congregation Beth Elohim, Charleston, South Carolina," in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987), p. 274-296.

Pioneer congregations of different periods in American history, from different parts of the world and infused with different religious traditions, Beth Elohim and Eldridge Street were similar in charting out which Jewish traditions would change or be maintained in America. Beth Elohim adopted innovations that led to the development of Reform Judaism in America.[6] Eldridge Street Synagogue staunchly maintained Eastern European religious and cultural traditions but adopted new political practices, economic goals, and ideals of beauty and decorum they observed in America. The Eldridge Street Synagogue is evidence of the struggle to create a new American Orthodox tradition that valued the Eastern European past and also looked forward to a future in America.

ISAAC M. WISE (PLUM STREET) TEMPLE, CINCINNATI, OHIO

The Isaac M. Wise (Plum Street) Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio opened in 1866 at the moment when Cincinnati was the fastest growing city in the United States, with a population of over 10,000 Jews. The synagogue, which was led by Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, was a hub of Reform activity servicing Jews of German origin in the late nineteenth century.[7]

The Plum Street Temple was located at the meeting point of four corners; it faced two churches and City Hall. Plum Street's site at the center of Cincinnati political and religious life was a claim to the power and prestige of Reform Judaism. The building, which resembles Eldridge Street in its mix of Moorish and Gothic architectural styles, was emblematic of the second great wave of immigration to America, the arrival of German Jews in the midwest.[8]

Visited in sequence, Touro Synagogue, Plum Street Temple, and the Eldridge Street Synagogue present tourists with a history of the three great waves of immigration. Touro represents the world of Colonial-era Sephardic Jews, Plum Street stands for the Reform movement and its burgeoning in the nineteenth-century midwest, and Eldridge Street is an emblem of the great Eastern European turn-of-the-century migration.

CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Central Synagogue, whose original, Bohemian, congregation Ahawath Chesed (Love of Mercy) began worshipping on Ludlow Street in 1846, hired Henry Fernbach to build a Moorish-style synagogue on Fifty-fifth Street and Lexington Avenue in 1872. In 1898, Ahawath Chesed merged with the German-speaking Reform congregation Shaar Hashomayim (Gate of Heaven), which had been worshipping since 1839 in lower Manhattan. The combined groups became known as Congregation Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim; in 1918 they began using the name Central Synagogue.[9] The members were from Central Europe, predominantly Bohemia, and followed liberal, Reform practices.

---

[6]Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim was designated an NHL in 1980 in recognition of its national significance for architecture and its role in the history of American Judaism.

[7] Jonathan Sarna and Nancy H. Klein, *The Jews of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience, Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, 1989).

[8]The Plum Street Temple was designated an NHL in 1975 in recognition of its national significance for architecture; no judgement was made, at the time, on its significance in the history of American Judaism.

[9]Central Synagogue was designated an NHL in 1975 in recognition of its national significance for architecture; no judgement was made, at the time, on its significance in the history of American Judaism.

Central's building, on Fifty-fifth Street, is the oldest standing synagogue in New York City, predating Eldridge Street, the second oldest, by fifteen years. Like Plum Street, Central Synagogue represents the religious and cultural life of the second, Central European migration to America, while Eldridge Street represents the third, Eastern European wave.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

Black and White Prints

1. Photograph of Exterior, Eldridge Street Synagogue, Fernando Joffroy, Public Art Fund, Inc., 1995

2. "Reading From The Scroll," drawing of Eldridge Street Synagogue interior, from "Jews In New York," *Century Magazine*, 1892.

3. Architectural Rendering, facade, Eldridge Street Synagogue, Robert E. Meadows P.C. Architects, 1991.

4. Architectural Rendering, interior, south elevation, Eldridge Street Synagogue, 1991.

Color Slides

1. Facade, Eldridge Street Synagogue, 1990.

2. Exterior Rendering, Eldridge Street Synagogue, Collection of Museum of the City of New York, 1886.

3. Detail of Facade, Moorish Arches, 1990.

4. "Reading From The Scroll," drawing of Eldridge Street Synagogue interior, from "Jews In New York," *Century Magazine*, 1892.

5. Eldridge Street Synagogue Interior, 1987.

6. Detail of Stained Glass Window, Eldridge Street Synagogue, 1990.

7. Detail of Cantor's Platform (Music Stand), Eldridge Street Project, 1990.