

The Birmingham Central Synagogue Ark and Furnishings

The Ark – housing the Scrolls of the Law



The shape of the Ark

A synagogue is representative of the Beit HaMikdash (Temple). The shape of the Birmingham Central Synagogue Ark was inspired by the ancient half-arches in the old city of Jerusalem leading through to the Kotel, the remaining wall of the Beit HaMikdash. The tall thin proportions of the Ark echo the feel of the narrow streets, and its height creates a dominant focal point that emphasises the high ceiling of the Shul (Synagogue) space.

Ner Tamid

The Ner Tamid (eternal light) has been integrated into the lettering design above the Ark – “Shiviti HaShem l’Negdi Tamid” (I place God before me always) – *Tehilim 16:8*. Utilising the two letters ‘Yud’ that represent the name of God to radiate light, with the shape and the juxtaposition of the two letters resembling a flame. The typeface of the lettering on the Ark, the Koren font of 1959, is that designed for the Koren Tanakh, the first official Bible of the State of Israel and the first to be totally produced by Jews in over 500 years.

Pelmet

The pelmet for the curtain is set at an angle, binding the two upper sections of the Ark together, whilst also accentuating its height. The design and shape of the pelmet (in a gold colour flowing towards the gold letters ‘Yud’ above it) echoes that of Tephillin (phylacteries) bound around an arm (or the letter ‘Shin’ on the hand) stretching upwards.

The Parochet (curtain) design

The design of the Parochet draws on the functionality and the symbolism of the Ark.



Keter Torah – Crown of the Torah

The Ark houses Sifrei Torah (Scrolls of the Law). A crown in the shape of a Hebrew letter Shin dominates the curtain, but unlike a traditional crown used in such decorations, the design of this crown is based on the Tagim (crowns) found on letters within a Sefer Torah. Although these do not influence how a word is pronounced, if a crown is missing, a Sefer Torah is considered to be possul (unfit for use). Emphasising the crown within the design is taking the smallest and very much an overlooked but crucial component of the Torah and bringing it to the forefront of the Shul decoration.

Dalet knot – geometric background pattern

An Ark is representative of the Tabernacle, the house of God where, in the days of Moses, the High Priest would communicate with God. The Talmud explains that the closest sighting of God is when Moses saw the knot on the Tephillin Shel Rosh (phylactery for the head) from behind. This knot is known as the Dalet knot due to its shape being comparable to the Hebrew letter Dalet. The repetitive background pattern comprises of a rectangle and square forming the letter Dalet and a further square at an angle illustrative of the strap extending from the Dalet knot. The red colour is introduced to the background pattern down the right side of the curtain to provide a visual continuation of the deep red wooden arched frame obscured by the curtain.

Turquoise loops and gold clasps

The width of the curtain fabric necessitated a seam down the centre of the curtain. Fortunately, a similar challenge is described in the Torah for the coverings of the Tabernacle which clearly explains that fifty turquoise loops on the edges of each fabric panel were paired-up and secured with gold clasps. This provided the basis for the central pattern that also gives the impression of a centrally parting curtain, although the curtain is joined and opens just towards the right side.

Colour

The colours used in the curtain along with the gold are Turquoise, Purple and Scarlet; these being the three colours of thread described for the Tabernacle coverings. Rashi (an 11th century Rabbinic commentator) explains that six threads of these colours in addition to six threads of linen were spun into a single thread. These 24 threads (in cross-section) are depicted on the Bima (reading desk) cover design arranged to form a Magen David (star of David).

Complementary design for the Yamim Nora'im (High Holy Days)

A similar format has been applied in the design of the white curtain used for the Yamim Nora'im. In addition to replacing the purple background with white and cream, the focal point of the design – the crown on the letter – is substituted for the crown of a pomegranate, utilising the same letter Shin shaped crown in both designs. A pomegranate is one of the seven species of the Land of Israel and is traditionally eaten during the New Year.

Hidden message

A subtle message is incorporated in the design. The geometric background pattern incorporates the shapes of Ta'amin (musical notes) from the Tenakh. The order of these notes corresponds to a phrase in the Tenakh that is relevant to the Ark. Similarly, a series of Ta'amin corresponding to a different phrase are included in the Bimah cover and the Ta'amin from other phrases on the covers used for the Yamim Nora'im.

Technical design challenge

Designing a curtain with a large dominating design element is a challenge in itself. Curtain fabric is gathered into pleats resulting in the necessity for the larger design elements (the Shin crown) to be stretched widthways in order for the pleating to gather the design back to its intended proportions. However, the smaller design elements are viewed as individual components and are not stretched. A further complexity is caused by the angle of the curtain in order to enable the geometric background pattern to run horizontal. As the curtain fabric is gathered forming the pleats the angle of the material is cut at a different angle to that of the curtain rail in order to maintain the required geometry when the curtain hangs.



Divine message

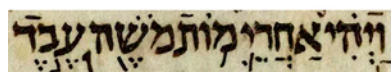
On completion of the design project it was evident that three Hebrew letters are given prominence in the design. These letters being Shin (the crown shape), Dalet (the Dalet knot pattern) and Yud (the letters that stand proud, forming the Ner Tamid). These three letters together spell the name of God.

Choice of Hebrew typefaces

The Hebrew typeface for the initials of *Keter Torah* is different to that of the lettering on the top of the Ark. Due to the necessity to stretch the Shin crown motif including the Keter Torah initials it was decided not to use the Koren font (as used above the Ark) as Eliyahu Koren was very particular about the proportions of his typeface and he would not have approved of such deformations to his Koren typeface. Therefore, a font based on maintaining the calligraphic letter style of the Aleppo Codex, designed for the Keter Yerushalayim Tanakh (2001) has been applied in a stretched form on the curtain which hangs back to its correct narrow proportions. Zvi Narkis, the designer of the Keter Yerushalayim typeface, appreciated that digital transformations may be applied to his letterforms.

אבגדהוזחטיכךלמם
נזסעפףצץקרשת

Koren Tanakh Font (1959)

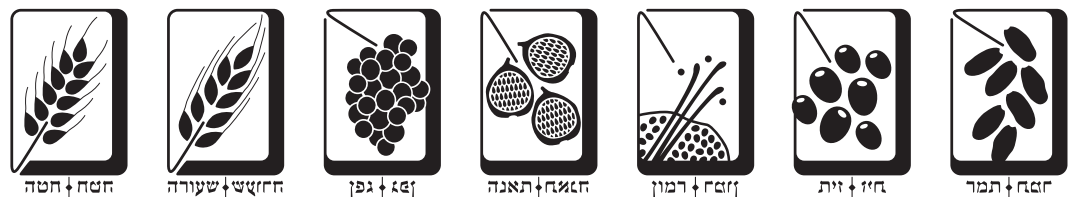
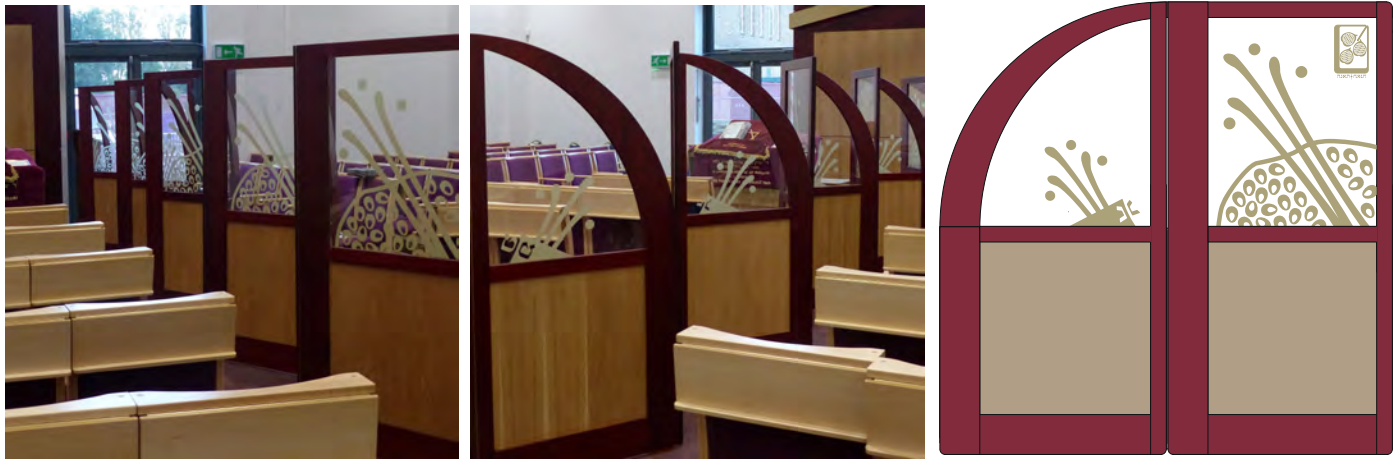


Aleppo Codex (10th c.)

אבגדהוזחטיכךלמם
נזסעפףצץקרשת

Keter Yerushalayim (2001)

The Mechitzah (partition)



Shape of the Mechitzah

The objective of the Mechitzah design is to form an integral part of the Shul through its similarity to the Ark, creating a link to the Ark rather than a division separating the women from the Ark. The arch shape also provides an ideal form, as psychologically the origin of an arch shape is that of an opening rather than a partition.

A particular challenge was to obscure the view from the men's side to the ladies' but also to provide the ladies with clear visibility through to the reading desk and Ark. A further challenge was that the Mechitzah screen needed to be portable but to give the impression of a permanent structure in a purpose-built Shul. A concertina format provided the basis of an ideal solution, with pairs of panels angled to be freestanding, each comprising of an arched and a rectangular section. The view from the men's side of the Mechitzah, when facing forward, is predominantly of the rectangular panels whereas a view through the more open arched sections is presented from the ladies side.

Mechitzah decoration

Seven pairs of Mechitzah panels span the length of the Shul. This provides an ideal number of sections for the continuation of the crown theme of the curtain. Tagim (crowns), as featured on the Ark curtain, are required on all occurrences in the Torah of seven particular letters of the Hebrew alphabet. These letters are known by the acronym Shatnez Gatz (Shin, Ayin, Tet, Nun, Zayin, Gimel, Tzadi) and one letter is illustrated on each of the arched sections of the Mechitzah panels. Following on from the Ark cover with the pomegranate for the Yamim Nora'im, one of the seven species of Israel is included on each of the seven rectangular sections of the Mechitzah panels. The Hebrew names of the seven species are included with the illustrations, in both right-reading and mirror image forms. This ensures the words are legible from both sides of the Mechitzah. Although this repetition in both directions is not ideal, it provides a reminder of the Midrash (Rabbinic explanation) that describes how the Ten Commandments were cut through the stone tablets, yet were correctly legible from both sides. The repetition of words in both directions on the Mechitzah provides a reminder that this is not physically possible and that we are only human. The use of the Letter Nun repeated in its reflective form also provides a reminder of the use of the inverted Nuns in the Torah (Numbers 10.35).

Jerusalem Wall Art

The entrance area to the Birmingham Central Synagogue is decorated with a colourful stylised canvas illustrating the half arches of the Jerusalem old city streets. A total of seven overlapping arches are representative of the seven gates of Jerusalem with twenty-six stones of the Kotel corresponding to the numeric value of the name of God. A green curve at the foot of the canvas in seven stripes, represent the seven hills of Jerusalem. A photographic human element has been included in the form of the corner of a tallit flying through an arch, inspired through a similar composition being captured on camera in the original reference photographs of the arches.

