

# Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity

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Volume 6  
Number 1 (2020)

Article 7

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12-1-2020

## Moorish Revival Synagogue Architecture: Community and Style, Past and Present

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### Recommended Citation

Jelen, E. S. (2020). Moorish Revival Synagogue Architecture: Community and Style, Past and Present. *Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity*, 6(1). Retrieved from <https://orb.binghamton.edu/alpenglowjournal/vol6/iss1/7>

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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank the Summer Scholars and Artists Program for providing me with the resources to perform this research, as well as my faculty advisor Dr. Julia Walker for working with me throughout this process.





# Moorish Revival Synagogue Architecture: Community and Style, Past and Present

Emily Jelen

## Abstract

The Moorish architectural style, originating in medieval Spain, was revived in the mid-nineteenth century. It became strongly linked with synagogues, first in Germany and then throughout the Western world. My research analyzes why the architects and Jewish communities were so attracted to the Moorish Revival style. During this period, European Jewish communities were tasked with constructing synagogues that could showcase their newfound freedoms as well as their history, culture and aspirations. Many argue that this style was chosen to demonstrate the connection between the communities and their ancient Middle Eastern history.

## Temple Architecture

Most historians believe that the Moorish Revival style in synagogues draws heavily from the design of the biblical Temple of Solomon.<sup>5,6</sup> Period sketches of the Temple portray it in various Islamic or Middle Eastern styles, including Egyptian and Moorish. The two columns at the front of most Moorish Revival synagogues are reminiscent of the columns flanking the entrance to the biblical Temple.<sup>7</sup> The architects of these Jewish communities may have chosen this style to showcase the Jews' strong ancient history.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Reform movement, which rejected any notion of a Messiah or a rebuilding of the biblical Temple, considered the synagogue to be a Temple in itself.<sup>9,10</sup>



Figure 3: Exterior of the Spanish Synagogue in Prague, Czech Republic, built 1868

## Connection to Sephardim

With an increase in freedoms for the Jewish people came an increase in antisemitism. However, there was one Jewish community in particular that was able to integrate into the broader society—the Sephardim, or Spanish Jews. These Jews, living in medieval Spain, were known to be knowledgeable and active in both religious Jewish life and secular life. The Jews of the nineteenth century may have therefore been trying to compare themselves to the Sephardic Jews<sup>11,12</sup>—just as the Sephardim were able to integrate fully, so could they. However, this opinion can only be found from the late nineteenth century onward, and is therefore, according to some, merely a post factum rationale.<sup>13</sup>

## 'Oriental' Architecture

As travel and contact between Europe and Asia increased in the nineteenth century, 'Orientalism' (a Western interpretation of Middle Eastern styles), including the Moorish Revival style, became a popular approach to European art and architecture. It was, however, considered inferior to the European styles.<sup>14,15</sup> While some claim that the Jews may have been trying to assert their 'Oriental,' or Middle Eastern, roots,<sup>16</sup> others question whether they would have deliberately chosen a style that would make them appear uncivilized.<sup>17</sup> It may instead have been the non-Jewish architects who chose this style to present their view of the Jewish people as un-European or primitive.<sup>18,19</sup>

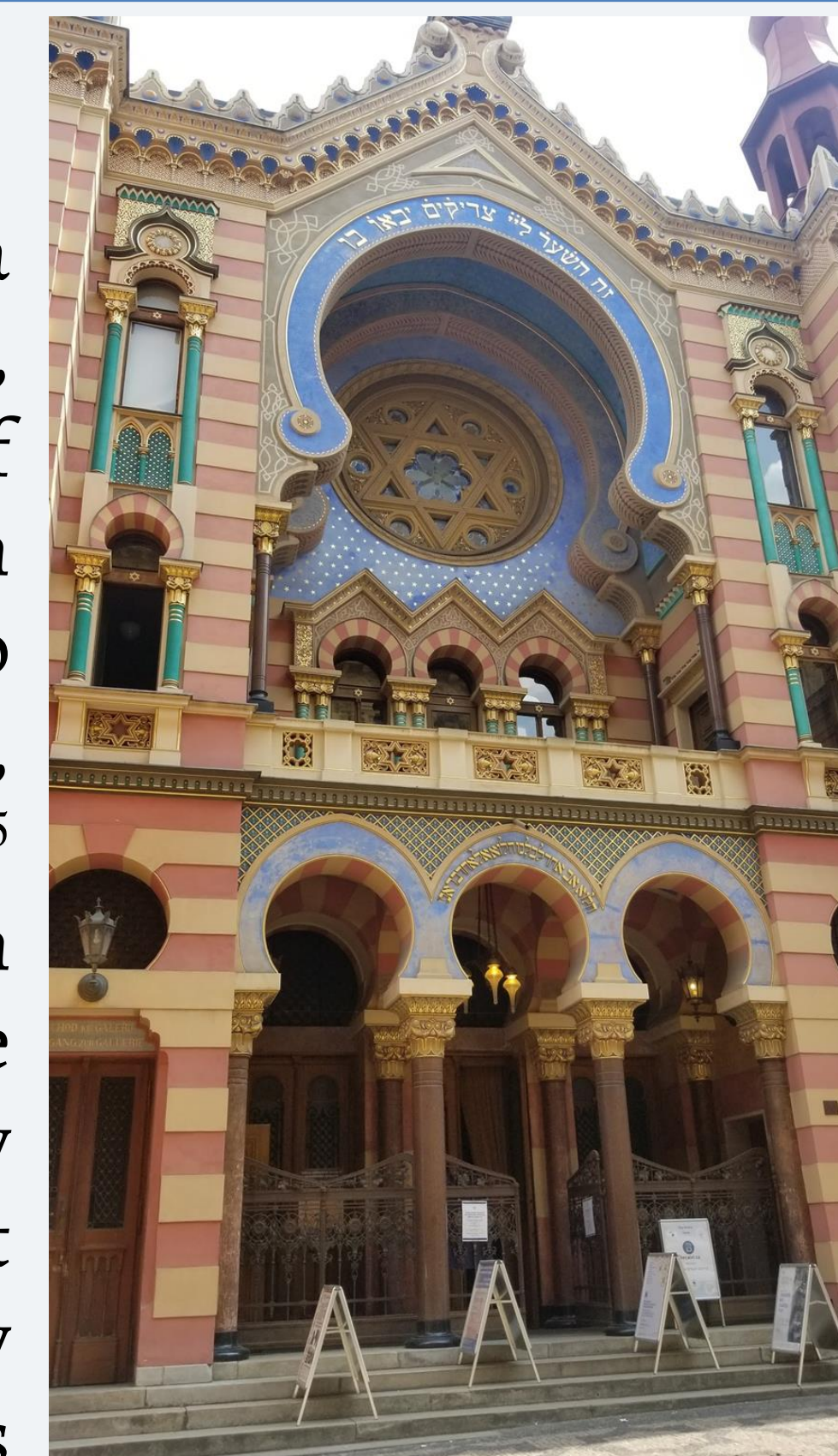


Figure 4: Exterior of the Jubilee Synagogue in Prague, Czech Republic, built 1906

## Church Model

Many of the Moorish Revival synagogues bear a striking resemblance to churches.<sup>20</sup> Traditionally, Jewish synagogues had a *bimah*, reading table, in the center of the room, with seating organized around it. However, during this period, we start to see many synagogues with a long aisle down the center (similar to a nave), the *bimah* moved to the front (like an altar),<sup>21</sup> rose windows in the facade, and even an organ. This stylistic shift may have stemmed from a desire to 'fit in' with the outside community, by altering the Jewish religious structure to look like that of the Christian neighbors.

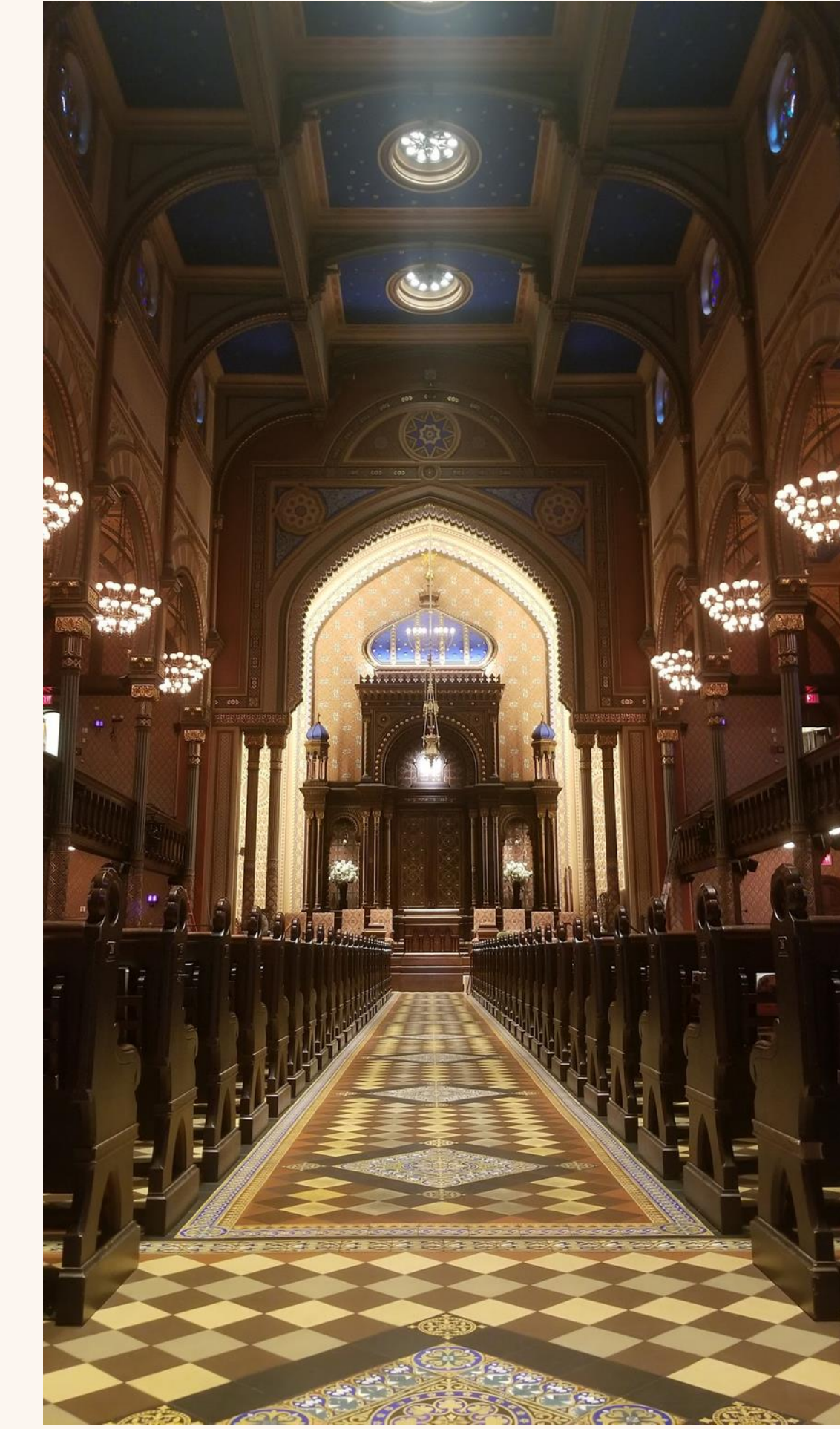


Figure 5: Interior of the Central Synagogue in New York City, New York, built 1872

## Who Decided?

According to David Cassuto, a leading architect and architectural historian in Israel, the community delegates would commission the structure, but it was up to the architect to choose the style. Cassuto argues that the style therefore represented the architect's opinion of 'Judaism' and of the Jewish community.<sup>22</sup> However, there were instances, such as in the city of Kassel, where the community chose to reject the plans of a synagogue in the Egyptian Revival style (similar to Moorish Revival) in favor of a more European design.<sup>23,24</sup>

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Summer Scholars and Artists Program for providing me with the resources to perform this research, as well as my faculty advisor Dr. Julia Walker for working with me throughout this process.

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## Historical Background

As a result of the political changes throughout Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, Jews were granted more freedoms and rights.<sup>1</sup> They were allowed to leave their ghettos, apply for jobs previously unattainable, and build large communal structures, such as synagogues.<sup>2</sup> This period also marked the birth of the Reform movement, which claimed that many Jewish laws were archaic and that the modern Jew should fully embrace the newfound opportunities in the secular world.<sup>3</sup> Many of the Moorish Revival synagogues were built by the Reform communities as they worked to carve out their place as Jews in society.

**"The Moorish style seems to me the most characteristic. Jewry hangs on with indestructible piety to its heritage, customs, and usages. The organization of its religious practice and, in short, its entire existence lives in reminiscences on its motherland, the Orient."**<sup>4</sup>

- Otto Simonson, "Der Neue Tempel in Leipzig," 1858



Figure 1: Interior of the Santa Maria la Blanca Synagogue in Toledo, Spain, built 1180

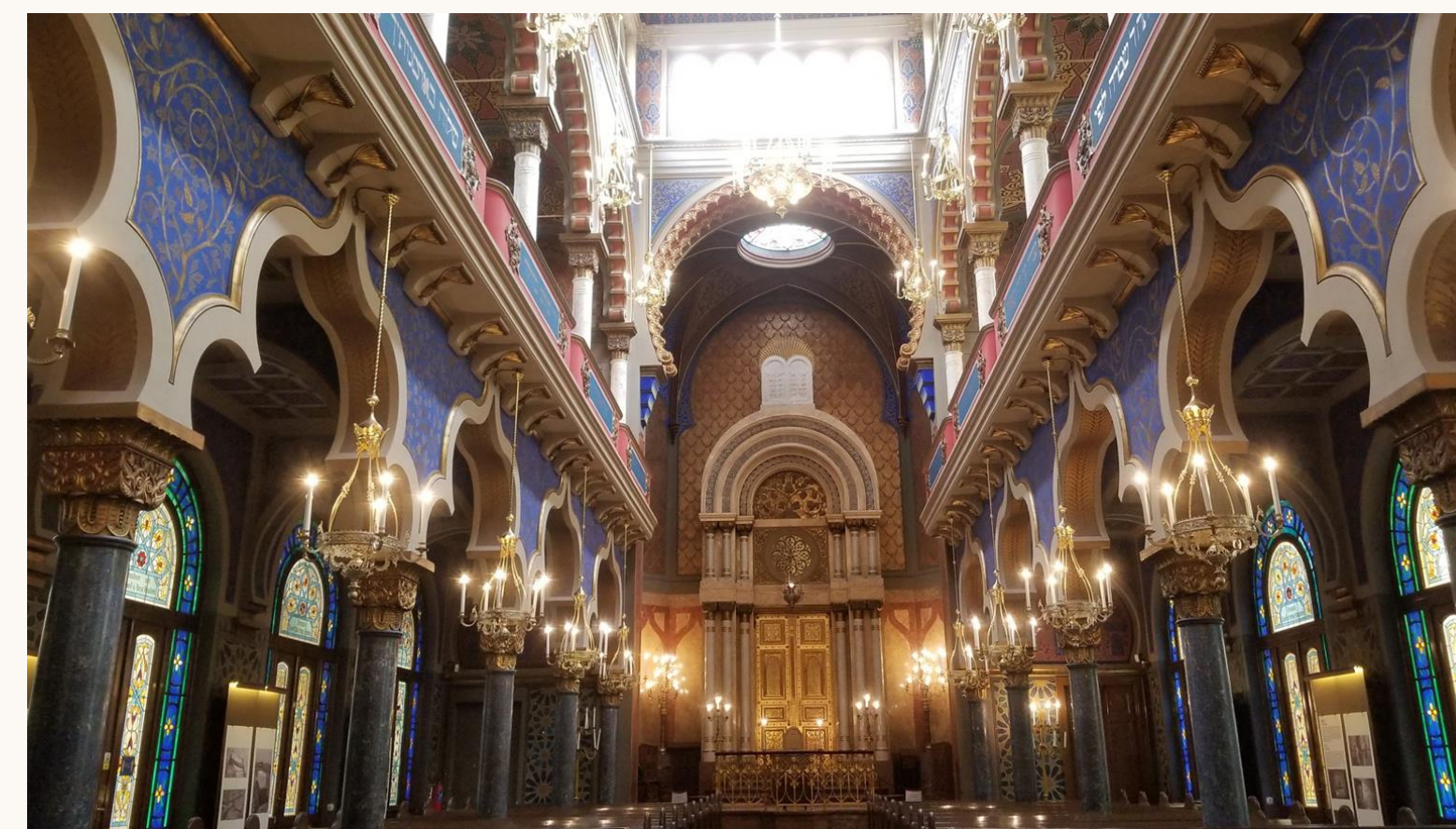


Figure 2: Interior of the Jubilee Synagogue in Prague, Czech Republic, built 1906