Agudath B'nnai Israel Synagogue, Lorain, Ohio
Stained Glass Windows

The stained glass windows in the sanctuary of Agudath B'nnai Israel (ABI) result from a unique interior concept. Twelve free-standing panels of glass serve the dual purpose of providing access to the sanctuary around its perimeter and bringing color and richness, as well as additional symbolism, into the interior.

The center point of all synagogue sanctuaries is the Aron Hakodesh, the ark where the Torah Scrolls (Five Books of Moses) are kept. The ABI stained glass carries out religious and historical motifs which lead to the ark in the center of the Bimah (pulpit). They were designed and executed by the award winning artist, Douglas Phillips, of Cleveland, Ohio.

The stained glass is rich in symbolism and while many interpretations are possible, the windows carry forth a bold statement about the eternity of Jewish existence. The twelve colored panels, six on each side of the ark, can be seen as representing the Twelve Tribes of Ancient Israel.

The central theme on the left panel as one faces the ark is the Burning Bush. It is through the bush that God first reveals Himself to Moses, as the Torah (Exodus 3:2) tells us, "...there was a bush all aflame yet the bush was not consumed." The burning bush is also symbolic of the Jewish people who have survived countless persecutions and were not consumed. The flames, in a rage of color, surrounding the bush form, in a number of places, both the seven branch Candelabrum and the Mogen David (the Star of David).
A tongue of flame crosses into panel 5 where the two tablets of the Ten Commandments are represented. The flame calls our attention to Exodus 19:18, "Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in flame..." The first Hebrew words from each of the tablets are seen in the glass. The oft used colors of the flames, red, yellow and purple, are contrasted with blue, the color of the sky; blue-green, the color of the sea and dominant green, the color of vegetation and of life. While the flames burn on all sides and each panel, life is not destroyed.

The use of yellow in panels one and four reminds us of the forty years of wandering in the desert before the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel. Where the panels overlap, the theme is carried on in both the ending and beginning panels in different colors. This effect can be seen most clearly by changing one's vantage point in the synagogue sanctuary.

The panels on the right side, as one faces the Aron Hakodesh (Ark) on the pulpit, show the inseparability of the Jewish religious heritage from Jewish history. The ever-present flames can be seen in each panel recalling to us the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the dispersion (Diaspora) of the Jews.

Panel two is very rich in its symbols. At the top are two swirls representing the tops of the Torah scroll. In Hebrew, these are called Atzei Hayyim, "Trees of Life," reminding us the Torah is the source of life for the Jewish people. The Torah scroll, which is hand written on parchment, has its own special ornamentation. Here we see the "Breastplate" with the symbols of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The symbols are derived from Jacob's blessing of his sons as recorded in Genesis 49:1-27 and from Moses' closing words in Deuteronomy 33:1-29. Starting from the upper right and moving to the left, we see: Row 1, Lion-Judah, Breastplate-Levi, Tower-Simeon and Plant-Rueben; Row 2, Tree-Asher, Tents-Gad, Deer-Naphtali and Snake-Dan; Row 3, Wolf-Benjamin, Unicorn-Joseph, Ship-Zebulon and Ass-Issachar.

Moving into panel three, on its far left we see the boot of Italy. It was to Rome that countless thousands of Jewish slaves were brought after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Italy was the earliest major center of Jewish life in Europe and it was through Italy that Jews migrated northward to other parts of Europe.
In panel four, we see an outline of England and France. South of the Pyrenees is Spain where the flourish of Jewish culture is known as the "Golden Age." Here, the great Jewish philosophers, teachers and statesmen, as well as every day people, thrived for nearly one thousand years. On the very day Columbus set sail for America, Jewish life came to an abrupt end in Spain through the imposition of the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jewish population. The flame crossing Spain calls to memory the fires of the Inquisition and the thousands of martyrs burned at the "Autos-da-fe."

Looking back from panel four toward panels three and two, we see the Torah scroll where Eastern Europe would be located. These flourishing centers of Jewish life, brutally destroyed in the Holocaust, were the ancestral homes of most of America's Jews. Moving to the United States in great waves of mass immigration, countless Jews turned their backs on the fires of European persecution.

They brought their religious heritage with them, represented in panel five by the Talit, the four cornered prayer shawl worn by all males above the age of thirteen at the morning synagogue service, and by the Hebrew words Sh'ma Yisrael, the call to Jews to dedicate their lives to the richness of their heritage. The first two words of the Sh'ma, taken from Deuteronomy 6:4, are seen in the glass. The Sh'ma, the first prayer a Jewish child learns and the last prayer we say before we leave this life, is found in both the Mezuzah, which is placed on the doorposts, and in the Tefillin, worn by Jewish men at the morning service except on the Sabbath and holidays. The recitation of the Sh'ma is a central part of both the morning and evening daily services.

In panel six, we see a six-branched Menorah forming the shape of a ship. Again, we are called to teach and observe our traditions, represented by the Menorah, which has been called the "Tree of Light" in the new world of America.