

*Samuel Field Y Adult Center*  
**The Origin Of The Synagogue**

**Summary Of Lecture:** The institution of the synagogue is not mentioned in the Bible. It may have developed as the result of another institution which is referred to in the Bible known as the city gates. That is the theory put forth by Professor Lee Levine, formerly at Yale University and now at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel, in his book, *The Ancient Synagogue*, Yale University Press, 2000.

The Bible describes the following activities taking place at the city gates: real estate transactions, political decisions, criminal court proceedings including the carrying out of sentences and court cases involving marital issues. In addition, the earliest record of a public reading of the Torah took place at a city gate.

The city gates also served as the location for early markets. Evidence exists that many early markets included a religious institution. It was hoped that the local deity would bring peace and prosperity to those participating in the market.

These activities share in common the need to have the largest number of people participate or to learn of an event. Since the city gates represented a central area with a large amount of foot traffic, those goals could be reached when an activity took place there.

It appears from the various uses of the city gates that the synagogue as we know it today began as a place where the Torah was read publicly. Over time, other activities such as communal prayer and the reading of the prophets were added to the public reading of the Torah. Once the Second Temple was destroyed, the focus of service to G-d in the Jewish religion was transferred from the Temple to the synagogue.

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Real Estate Transactions Took Place At The City-Gates

The Bible tells us that our forefather Abraham bought a burial plot for his wife, our foremother, Sarah. The transaction by which Abraham paid for the plot took place at the city gates:

*Bereishis 23, 10-And Ephron lived among the Hittites. Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham within the hearing range of the Hittites, all of whom were gathered at the gate of his city, saying.*  
*Bereishis 23, 18- To Abraham, as property purchased, in the presence of the Hittites, those of whom were gathered at the gate of his city.*

Political Decisions Were Made At The City Gate

*Bereishis 34, 20-And Hamor and Shechem, his son, came to the gate of their city and spoke with the men of their city, saying.*  
*Bereishis 34, 24- And to Hamor and to Shechem, his son, listened all who went in and out from the gate of his city; and every male was circumcised, all who went in and out of the gate of his city.*

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Criminal Cases Were Heard And Decided And Sentences Were  
Carried Out At The City Gate

*Devarim 21, 19-Then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city and to the gate of his place;*

*Devarim 22, 24- Then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city. You shall then stone them with stones until they perish; the woman, because she did not cry out, being in the city; and the man, because he violated his neighbor's wife; in order that you discourage the performance of evil from among you.*

*Joshua 20, 4-And He shall flee to one of those cities. He shall then stand at the entrance of the gate of the city, and shall explain his circumstances to the elders of that city. The elders then shall invite him into the city and provide him a place so that he may live among them.*

Marital Issues Were Resolved Were Resolved At The City Gate

*Ruth 4,1-Then Boaz went up to the gate, and sat down there. Behold, the next of kin of whom Boaz had spoken came by to whom he said: Hey there, Mr. so and so; turn aside, sit down here. He then turned aside and sat down.*

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The First Recorded Example Of The Public Reading Of The  
Torah Took Place At A City Gate

*Nehemia 8,1- And all the people gathered as one man in the open place before the Water Gate and they asked Ezra the Scribe to retrieve the Torah scroll of Moshe, which the Lord had commanded to Israel. 2. And Ezra the Priest brought the Torah before the congregation, consisting both of men and women, and all who could understand its contents, on the first day of the seventh month. 3. And Ezra read from it in front of the open space before the Water Gate, from early morning until noon, before the men and the women, and those who could understand; and within sound of all the people who were attentive to the book of the Torah. 4. And Ezra the Scribe stood upon a platform of wood, which had been made for this purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Uriah, and Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiyah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up; 6. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great G-d. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7. Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiyah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiyah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Torah; while the people stood in their places. 8. So they read in the book in the Torah of G-d clearly, and provided its interpretation, so that all present understood the reading.*

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The Requirement To Publicize An Act

Why does Judaism require the presence of ten men for the performance of some religious acts while for others it requires a smaller number?

*It therefore appears to me that I need to differentiate between the various circumstances. When a matter concerns the Jewish public in general and needs to be publicized to all Jews, then ten men must be present for the act to be considered a public act. Doing the same before three men might also be considered publicizing, but you will not be confident that the publicizing before the three men will cause the message to be delivered to the greater Jewish public. However concerning a personal matter, involving one individual, publicizing in front of three is sufficient. In that case we are not concerned as to whether the information will reach the general Jewish public. It appears to me that in all matters that involve the public at large, our Sages tried to find the means of publicizing that would reach the greatest number of people. That is what was meant in Maseches Menachos that the publicizing that took place before ten men was performed in the marketplace because the marketplace is the place where you can obtain the greatest maximum publicity. Based on this concept, we can reconcile all the parts of the Gemara that we cited. The publicizing of a matter that concerns the greater Jewish public must be done in front of ten men but the publicizing of a matter that concerns an individual can be done in front of three men.*

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The Need To Read The Torah At A Public Place

The glorification of G-d is increased by the number of people present.

The High Priest would read from the Torah on Yom Kippur:

*Maseches Yuma Chapter 7, Mishnah 1. The high priest then came to read. If he wished to read in linen garments he could do so, otherwise he would read in his own white vestments. The synagogue attendant would take a scroll of the law and give it to the head of the synagogue and the head of the synagogue gave it to the second one in command, and the second one in command gave it to the high priest, and the high priest stands and receives it, and reads the section beginning 'after the death . . . ' (Va'Yikra 16) and 'howbeit on the tenth. . . ' (Va'Yikra 23, 26-32), then he would roll up the scroll of the law and put it in his bosom and say, 'more than what I have read out before you is written here. and on the tenth . . . ' (Bamidbar 29, 7-11) which is in the book of Bamidbar he recites by heart. He then recites in connection therewith eight Brachos: for the law, for the temple service, for the thanksgiving, for the forgiveness of sins and for the temple separately, and for Israel separately and for Jerusalem separately, for the Kohanim separately and for the rest of the prayer.*

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**The Origin Of The Synagogue**

On Fast Days, The Ark Carrying The Torah Would Be Taken Out Into The Street:

*Maseches Taanis, Chapter 2, Mishnah 1- What is the order of the service for fast days? The ark is taken out to the open space of the city, wood ashes are placed on the ark, on the head of the Nasi and on the head of the ab-beth-din. Everyone else puts ashes on his own head; the elder among them addresses them with words of admonition to repentance: thus, our brethren, scripture does not say of the people of Nineveh, and G-d saw their sackcloth and their fasting, but, and G-d saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and in the prophets it is said, and rend your heart and not your garments.*

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Mondays And Thursdays As Days Of Gathering

Why Mondays And Thursdays Were Chosen As Market Days?

Relationship Between Market Days And Torah Reading

*An Ancient Economic History: From the Palaeolithic Age to the Migrations of the Germanic, Slavic and Arabic Nations Vol. 1 by Fritz M. Heichelheim, Joyce Stevens; A.W. Sijthoff, 1957 p. 248:*

Regular market days developed in Greece and Italy during the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. at the latest. Originally markets were held, as we have seen already, in the *agora*, a free place destined for political gatherings and religious festivals of the polis by ancient traditions. The Odyssey already describes, for the *agora* of the Phaeacians, economic and non-economic use in a probably late passage. Markets were of course most frequent in coastal towns and were often connected with some temple, the god of which was to guarantee the peace during market gatherings.

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**The Origin Of The Synagogue**

Advancing The Date On Which the Megila of Esther Was Read:

*Maseches Megila, Chapter 1, Mishnah 1- Circumstances can lead to Megilas Esther can be read on the eleventh, the twelfth, the thirteenth, the fourteenth, and the fifteenth of Adar, never earlier and never later. Cities which have been walled since the days of Yehoshua son of Nun read on the fifteenth; villages and large towns read on the fourteenth. the villages, however, may sometimes push the reading forward to the market day.*

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Theodotos Inscription

“Theodotus, (son) of Vettenus, priest and archisynagogos (ruler of the synagogue), son of an archisynagogos, grandson of an archisynagogos, built the synagogue for the reading of the law and the teaching of the commandments, and the guest-chamber and the rooms and the water installations for lodging for those needing them from abroad, which his fathers, the elders and Simonides founded.”