

The Wandering Congregation:
Spaces and Places of New York City's Gay Synagogue, 1973-1979



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Introduction

Michael Levine was at a gay bar—Marie’s Crisis in Greenwich Village, to be exact—when he learned about Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST).¹ It was 1974. Levine, who grew up in Brooklyn but now lived in the Village, no longer had a “shul [synagogue] of [his] own.”² He would sometimes attend the synagogue that his father went to in East Flatbush, and sometimes he would go to temple with family on Long Island. He even checked out the local Greenwich Village synagogues, but Levine did not feel comfortable. Why? “Someone would come up to me and say, ‘Are you new here?’ I’d say yes. ‘Are you single?’ I’d say yes. They say, ‘Oh, do I have a girl for you.’ And that was the end of it.”³

But that night at Marie’s Crisis, Levine reported in a 2021 interview, a friend asked, “Did you know that there is a gay synagogue?”⁴ That friend had spotted a flier in a pornography shop.⁵ The High Holy Days were coming up, so Levine decided to go to CBST for Yom Kippur services, which took place at the Church of the Beloved Disciple, a Catholic church for gay people.⁶

The service was held on the second floor. Because it was a loft building, you had to walk up a flight of stairs. And so I walked through the door, and I kept saying, ‘Oh my God, am I in the right place?’ ... And the second I walked in, heard the music, walked up the steps, and saw the Torah being carried around the room, I said, ‘Oh my God, this is like the Stonewall. I’m home again.’⁷

¹ The congregation is now known as Congregation Beit Simchat Torah. In this thesis, I use the name that the synagogue went by in the 1970s, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah.

² Michael Levine, interview by Mark Bowman, LGBTQ Religious Archives Network, January 6, 2021, <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/michael-levine>.

³ Levine, interview by Mark Bowman.

⁴ Levine, interview by Mark Bowman.

⁵ Ayelet S. Cohen, *Changing Lives, Making History: Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, The First Forty Years* (New York: Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, 2014), 15.

⁶ Heather White, “Proclaiming Liberation: The Historical Roots of LGBT Religious Organizing, 1946-1976,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11, no. 4 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2008.11.4.102>, 114.

⁷ Levine, interview by Mark Bowman.

Some congregants had similar stories, some different ones. Rick Landman came to CBST in 1973 after his mother, of all people, spotted an ad for the synagogue in the paper: “Ricky, remember when you said one day there'll be a gay synagogue?” Landman remembered his mother saying. “I said you were meshuga [crazy]. Well, there's a gay synagogue. Look. Get dressed and go to shul.”⁸ Regina Linder, at the time a graduate student at New York University, also found CBST through the press. “There was a tiny article in the back pages of the *New York Times*, and it talked about a little, incipient synagogue in the Village, and it described a hundred men in yarmulkes... My first service was actually Rosh Hashanah, which was at the Church of the Beloved Disciple on 14th Street.”⁹

Describing CBST as feeling like “home,” as Levine put it, emphasized the affection people felt for the synagogue. Indeed, such a description was common.¹⁰ Dick Radvon, who joined the synagogue in 1973 after seeing an ad for CBST in the paper, similarly remembered being at the Church of the Holy Apostles, where early Shabbat services took place, and thinking, “This feels like home.”¹¹ Congregants vividly remembered the synagogue as it existed in the 1970s: they recalled the ads they spotted, the bars they were at, and the people they knew who directed them to the congregation. They remembered in detail the first services they attended, including where they took place and what the space looked like and felt like—from the kids’ chairs in the church classroom where the congregation initially met to the impassioned dancing that took place during Shabbat services to the Entenmann’s cakes that were an oneg (social hour) staple.¹² One might wonder about the extent to which such descriptions developed in retrospect,

⁸ Rick Landman, interview by Sarah Patt, December 4, 2017, Telling Stories, NYU Journalism Projects, <http://projects.nyujournalism.org/tellingstories/>.

⁹ Regina Linder, interview by Aliza Schwartz and Adam Graubart, January 27, 2023, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIX_XYHtb8Y.

¹⁰ Moshe Shokeid, *A Gay Synagogue in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 77.

¹¹ Cohen, 15.

¹² Levine, interview by Mark Bowman; Cohen, 29.

rooted as they may have been in nostalgia. Sure, such language is evocative and emotive—but is it nothing more?

CBST was founded in February 1973 when a small group of gay men, responding to an advertisement that Jacob Gubbay, seeking gay-Jewish connection, had placed in the New York alternative paper the *Village Voice*, came together for a Shabbat service. Gubbay had organized for the service to be held at Chelsea's Church of the Holy Apostles, which hosted many gay organizations in the 1970s. CBST grew quickly: word spread via advertisements and articles in local newspapers, fliers in gay spaces, and word of mouth, and many people came following the 1973 Yom Kippur War.¹³ Since mainstream synagogues tended to assume heterosexuality and often did not welcome open discussions about homosexuality, many gay and lesbian Jews felt alienated from synagogue life and Judaism more broadly. CBST emerged during a period when gay and lesbian groups, including religious ones, proliferated: existing gay and lesbian congregations provided a model for the burgeoning congregation.¹⁴

The first enduring gay synagogue, Congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim of Los Angeles, had been founded in 1972, a year before CBST.¹⁵ Beth Chayim Chadashim grew directly out of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), an ecumenical church that was founded in 1968 in Los Angeles for the purpose of serving gay and lesbian individuals.¹⁶ MCC was not the first gay church (that was the Eucharistic Catholic Church, founded in 1946 in

¹³ Cohen, 14. Many American Jews sought Jewish connection in the wake of the Yom Kippur War.

¹⁴ Cohen, 16-19.

¹⁵ The House of David and Jonathan, a gay synagogue in Brooklyn that was founded in 1970 and lasted only six weeks, predated Congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim. See Jay Shockley, "Westbeth: Congregation Beit Simchat Torah," NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, updated May 2019, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/westbeth-congregation-beit-simchat-torah/#:~:text=Center%20Annual%20Report.-,History,according%20to%20the%20newspaper%20Gay.>

¹⁶ Dean Gengle, "Beth Chayim Chadashim: Model for a Creative Community," *Advocate* (Los Angeles, CA), August 25, 1976, LGBT Magazine Archive, ProQuest (hereafter cited as *Advocate*).

Atlanta), nor was it the first group to discuss the religious needs of gay people. MCC was, nevertheless, a rapid success: new branches quickly emerged across the United States, and the church became a denomination, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, two years after its establishment.¹⁷ Reverend Troy Perry, the founder of MCC, who was an ex-Pentecostal minister, charismatically promoted his congregation and soon became a well-known gay rights activist.¹⁸ MCC and the religious groups that followed in its footsteps, including Dignity (a Catholic organization) and a multitude of gay synagogues, were not hidden institutions. Rather, these congregations were highly visible and represented a gay-religious movement founded on the idea that gay-religious institutions could affirm gay-religious identities: homosexuality and religion did not have to conflict with each other.¹⁹

While CBST was foundationally non-traditional, the congregation did not see itself as departing from Jewish norms more generally. Soon after the synagogue's incorporation in November of 1973, the congregation established a Board of Trustees and took a name, Beth Simchat Torah, meaning "house of gladness in the Torah."²⁰ In the 1970s, CBST also had a volunteer rabbi, Pinchas Ben Aharon, who had grown up Hasidic and offered to lead Shabbat services alongside a couple of congregants. All CBST members were able to participate in leadership roles, regardless of experience. Because of the religious background of CBST's early service leaders, the congregation had a traditional flavor, although there was great diversity of practice within the community; this was the case for many gay congregations, which united

¹⁷ White, "Proclaiming Liberation," 103-05; 109.

¹⁸ White, "Proclaiming Liberation," 108-09.

¹⁹ White, "Proclaiming Liberation," 103; 105-06.

²⁰ Cohen, 19-20, 22.

under a common gay or lesbian identity rather than according to denomination.²¹ These services, and the onegs that followed them, offered many gay Jews a sense of comfort and community.²²

From the time of its founding, CBST focused on reshaping services and liturgy to align with the needs and values of its congregation. This involved removing gendered references from prayers, emphasizing egalitarianism, and customizing other elements of services.²³ Like much else at CBST, the congregation's first siddur (prayer book) was a makeshift accumulation of sources.²⁴ There were few women at CBST in its early years, which was a source of tension and a topic of discussion.²⁵ Though women were welcomed into the leadership, some male congregants remained quite uncomfortable with the idea, since women are traditionally excluded from rituals such as reading from the Torah. CBST worked (not very successfully) throughout the 1970s to increase the number of women in the congregation.²⁶ CBST also focused on fundraising. Members paid dues, but the congregation also sought more money to cover synagogue expenses, an off-putting act for some congregants. Such fundraising efforts were central to the congregation's eventual ability to lease a long-term space.²⁷

CBST was a politically active community from its inception. The congregation participated in activism in both the gay and Jewish worlds, and the year 1975 saw the establishment of a Jewish Affairs Committee and a Social Action Committee. However, care was taken to mask CBST's gay orientation at some Jewish events, such as marches for Soviet Jewry, to protect its members: the CBST banner had a detachable bottom that said "the Gay

²¹ Cohen, 31-33, 44; Gregg Drinkwater, "Creating an Embodied Queer Judaism: Liturgy, Ritual and Sexuality at San Francisco's Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, 1977-1987," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725886.2019.1593687>, 182.

²² Cohen, 28-29

²³ Cohen, 33-34; 132.

²⁴ Cohen, 132-133.

²⁵ Cohen, 25.

²⁶ Cohen, 49.

²⁷ Cohen, 40-41.

Synagogue.” Congregants were heavily involved in gay activist organizations. After CBST had a long-term home (and before the founding of the LGBT Community Center), the synagogue played host to gay organizations and political gatherings.²⁸ CBST was also part of the World Congress of GLBT Jewish Organizations from the time of the network’s founding in 1976.²⁹



Figures 1 and 2. CBST marching in parades (likely the Christopher Street Liberation Day march, above, and a march for Soviet Jewry, below) in the 1970s. The “Gay Synagogue” banner was detachable (photo courtesy of the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network).

²⁸ Cohen, 246-48.

²⁹ Cohen, 256-57.

The development of gay congregations intersected with wider American radicalism and the emerging gay liberation movement in the 1970s. Late-1960s political activism and protest—including Black Power, feminism, the New Left, and the antiwar movement—centered on the ideals of liberation and revolution.³⁰ 1960s radicalism influenced the homophile movement, the early gay activism groups of the 1950s and 60s that established the idea of homosexuals as a distinctive minority, and organizations emerged that emphasized that the gay and lesbian community had unique needs.³¹ Then, in June 1969, the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, was subjected to a police raid, and people in the establishment responded by fighting with the police—actions that sparked a riot.³² Even though it hardly gave birth to the idea of gay liberation, anti-police protests, or gay political activism, this event was a major turning point: it was quickly interpreted and commemorated as the start of a gay liberation movement, the rhetoric and energy of which rapidly spread via existing activist networks.³³

The movement now prioritized the need for gay and lesbian people to claim a space of their own. The gay liberation movement began to emphasize the concept of “coming out,” the act of publicly sharing one’s gay or lesbian identity, and visibility was central to the movement’s ideology. Lesbian feminism further energized the movement, linking it to the women’s liberation movement and thus to a wider movement culture. Gay organizations flourished and built on a larger subculture, and groups like gay churches and synagogues reflected the emphasis placed on coming out by visibly existing within the purview of religious denominations or other institutions.³⁴

³⁰ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 224-26.

³¹ D’Emilio, 4-5, 227.

³² Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, “Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth,” *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (2006), 724, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25472425>.

³³ Armstrong and Crage, 724-25; D’Emilio, 231-33.

³⁴ D’Emilio, 235-38.

Within the wider context of 20th-century social movements, gay people were not the only marginalized group reimagining religion. The Black church, for example, played a powerful role in the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1950s, ministers promoted a religion that placed a heavy emphasis on social equality, stressing the need to take active steps such as protesting so as to transform social conditions. The Black church, as an influential and independent institution, helped to transform the consciousness of Black people and provided the space and organization necessary for the growing movement.³⁵ Similarly, in the 1960s, Liberation Theology emerged in Latin America in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasized that the Catholic Church had a responsibility towards living people who deserved basic human rights in this world.³⁶ Liberation Theology emphasized that religion must be linked to social and political contexts, asserted that God allied with the poor in their struggle against oppression, and connected salvation to social justice by positioning it as liberation in this world rather than an achievement in the afterlife.³⁷ American Judaism, too, saw changes: a growing focus on egalitarianism developed in the 1960s and 1970s, and groups pushed back against traditional hierarchical synagogue structures by emphasizing forward-looking innovation.³⁸ A congregation like CBST thus emerged within a wider context of different groups that radically reimagined religion in a way that challenged existing norms and promoted social justice and equality.

³⁵ Aldon Morris, "The Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement: The SCLC as the Decentralized, Radical Arm of the Black Church," in *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social-Movement Activism*, ed. Christian Smith (New York: Routledge, 1996), 29, 43.

³⁶ Sharon Erickson Nepstad, "Popular Religion, Protest, and Revolt: The Emergence of Political Insurgency in the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran Churches of the 1960s-80s," in Smith, *Disruptive Religion*, 109-110.

³⁷ Nepstad, 110-11.

³⁸ Drinkwater, 178.

Literature Review

First and foremost, this thesis engages with scholarship on LGBTQ history. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, George Chauncey argues that, far from being isolated and invisible, gay men created, participated in, and engaged in acts of everyday resistance to maintain a rich subculture in the pre-World War II era.³⁹ The label of “homosexual” as a category of identity, dichotomized against the “heterosexual,” only emerged between the 1930s and 1950s.⁴⁰ Indeed, Chauncey shows that the idea of the “closet” did not emerge until the 1960s.⁴¹ Chauncey particularly underscores the importance of spaces in which gay social networks flourished in pre-World War II gay New York.⁴² John D’Emilio, in his study *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, shows how the homophile movement established the idea of homosexuals as a distinctive minority. This encouraged the creation of organizations that emphasized that the gay and lesbian community had unique needs.⁴³ My thesis emerges from Chauncey’s and D’Emilio’s foundational scholarship, which situates different eras of LGBTQ history within their specific historical contexts while also recognizing continuities—such as the importance of space—between them.

While astonishing strides have been made in the realm of LGBTQ history, religion has been less studied within this context. A telling example of the treatment of religion is the way in which Marc Stein, in his book *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, repeatedly includes religion in lists—“the gay and lesbian community was divided along lines of age, class, gender, race, region, *religion*, sex, and other factors,” “liberation from *religion*, capitalism, and the state,”

³⁹ Chauncey, 2-5.

⁴⁰ Chauncey, 13, 22.

⁴¹ Chauncey, 6.

⁴² Chauncey, 2, 23

⁴³ D’Emilio, 4-5; 227.

“gay and lesbian activists targeted business, *religion*, and popular culture”—but hardly explores queer religiosities alone.⁴⁴ Religion is often framed primarily as a repressive and oppressive force, something against which activists must protest. For instance, the anthology *Smash the Church, Smash the State!: The Early Years of Gay Liberation* takes its title from a gay liberation-era chant. This makes clear that religion *was* something that activists often confronted, something that often did legitimize and spread homophobia. However, this title suggests that religion was a purely antagonistic force.⁴⁵ The idea that religion and homosexuality are incompatible remains present down to this day both in scholarship and in American culture more generally.⁴⁶

However, more and more scholars now challenge this assumption, as I, too, seek to do in this study. For instance, the volume *Devotions and Desires: Histories of Sexuality and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States*, edited by Gillian Frank, Bethany Moreton, and Heather White, frames sexuality and religion as intertwined categories, arguing that the ideas of “sexual liberalism” and “religious pluralism” are actually quite similar in evolution and theory, in that both emphasize 20th-century change and individual empowerment and highlight minority groups.⁴⁷ This volume demonstrates that religion has not solely regulated and repressed sexuality, but rather that sexual liberalism was formed, in part, on the basis of religious bodies (via the promotion and assigning of spiritual significance to sexuality, even by traditional groups). The authors identify the common ways of thinking about religion and sexuality as products of modern history that developed alongside therapeutic sciences in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ See Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 34, 30, 135. Emphases are my own.

⁴⁵ See Tommi Avicelli Mecca, ed., *Smash the Church, Smash the State!: The Early Years of Gay Liberation* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2019).

⁴⁶ Gillian Frank, Bethany Moreton, and Heather White, introduction to *Devotions and Desires: Histories of Sexuality and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 4.

⁴⁷ Frank, Moreton, and White, 5.

⁴⁸ Frank, Moreton, and White, 7.

Volumes specifically about LGBTQ religion include *Gay Religion*, edited by Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray, which argues that innovative gay religious groups and denominations fit squarely within a larger American religious tradition marked by “innovation and continuity.”⁴⁹ Thumma and Gray seek to showcase positive gay religion, working against the idea that religion is solely a harmful force when it comes to queer identity. However, Thumma and Gray also suggest that gay religious groups can be categorized according to whether they prioritize tradition or gay experience—a priority which then shapes the religion and structure of groups. This, I think, is an unnecessary imposition of a mutually exclusive framework, one which I believe CBST challenges. Another volume, *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking, brings together scholarship on a vast range of religious practices, places, and time periods. This volume asks whether studying queerness and religion together can generate transformations within queer studies and religious studies; hence it investigates “whether something that supports or ritualizes homosexuality can be religion.”⁵⁰ Certainly, there is much room for growth in the realm of queer religious studies—the field, at the moment, tends to be quite Christian-centric, for one thing, and more work is certainly warranted on other religious traditions and faith practices—but these volumes nevertheless showcase the exciting possibilities of this mode of inquiry.

In this thesis, I engage in particular with the work of two scholars of the intersection between queerness and religion. Historian Gregg Drinkwater and religious studies scholar Heather White emphasize, within the respective contexts of Jewish and Christian congregations, distinctly queer forms of religious practice. In his article “Creating an Embodied Queer Judaism: Liturgy, Ritual and Sexuality at San Francisco’s Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, 1977-1987,”

⁴⁹ Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray, introduction to *Gay Religion* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005), xiv-xv.

⁵⁰ Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking, introduction to *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 15.

Drinkwater uses the term “queer Judaism,” which he defines as the creation of “new forms of Jewish liturgy, ritual, and embodied practices that celebrated and politicized sexual minorities, created new forms of chosen family, and fostered an ethic of egalitarian and lay-led inclusiveness that invited participation from those normally pushed to the margins of Jewish life.”⁵¹ In an exploration of the gay church movement in the article “Proclaiming Liberation: The Historical Roots of LGBT Religious Organizing, 1946-1976,” White emphasizes that “far from simply transplanting a political conception of gay identity into a religious arena, the religious movements I examine constructed and expressed a gay religious identity as an intrinsic—even divinely created—part of the self.”⁵² Drinkwater and White’s frameworks for viewing queer congregations as engaging in processes of syncretization, forming not only a religious collective of queer people but also a *queer religion*, lay the groundwork for this thesis. Yet within the very small field of queer religious history, little attention has been paid to the significance of place and space within gay religious organizations. I seek to fill this gap, demonstrating that negotiations of place and space within CBST played a primary role in shaping CBST’s queer religiosity. I also engage with a range of scholarship on discourse, the press, and communication networks, as well as on memory and narrative.

My thesis is also situated against the wider backdrop of the 1970s, and therefore I engage carefully with scholarship that focuses on that era. In *The Subversive Seventies*, Michael Hardt argues that, while the 1970s tend to be overshadowed by the 1960s in cultural memory, the 1970s saw the continuation and development of social movements that focused on autonomy, multiplicity, democracy, and—most especially—liberation.⁵³ Indeed, with chapters on both gay liberation and liberation theology, Hardt helpfully demonstrates the common ethos of certain

⁵¹ Drinkwater, 178.

⁵² White, “Proclaiming Liberation,” 103.

⁵³ Michael Hardt, *The Subversive Seventies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3-4, 8.

1970s-era religious movements and gay rights activism, perhaps implicitly identifying liberation as a means by which people could unite gay activism with a liberatory interpretation of religion (not the liberation theology *movement*) within the specific context of the 1970s. As I show in this paper, this is precisely what CBST did through its negotiation of space. Similarly, Thomas Borstelmann, in his book *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, situates within the wider context of the 1970s the growth of a “resurgent Jewish religious identity” that was connected to a crystallizing collective memory of the Holocaust and Jewish history as well as growing support for Israel.⁵⁴ Borstelmann links this development to a general turn towards “celebrating a distinctive ethnic heritage as part of [an] American identity.”⁵⁵ He writes, “The common thread was respect, equal treatment, and inclusion of all groups previously burdened by discrimination.”⁵⁶ Borstelmann notes that this “rising tide of egalitarianism and inclusion that characterized the 1970s lifted homosexuals as well.”⁵⁷ Borstelmann thus broadly identifies shifts in Jewish consciousness and gay rights as influenced by some of the same trends; my thesis seeks to demonstrate specifically how such commonalities influenced the development of gay-Jewish consciousness in the 1970s. Lastly, Ayelet S. Cohen’s 2014 biography of CBST, *Changing Lives, Making History: Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the First Forty Years*, provided invaluable insight into the history of this congregation.

Though space and place have hardly been explored in relation to queer religion, scholars have extensively studied religious space, Jewish space, queer space, and the spaces of social movements.⁵⁸ Space and place as concepts have themselves been heavily debated and theorized.

⁵⁴ Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 101-102, 262.

⁵⁵ Borstelmann, 102.

⁵⁶ Borstelmann, 102.

⁵⁷ Borstelmann, 105.

⁵⁸ For a comprehensive exploration of religious space, see *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Space*, ed. Jeanne Halgren Kilde (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

In *American Sacred Space*, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal explore how certain landscapes or locations in the United States have been deemed sacred, emphasizing that interpretive and symbolic labor produces sacred space and that sacred space and the production thereof are always influenced by social power dynamics.⁵⁹ In *Space and Place in Jewish Studies*, Barbara E. Mann notes the duality of experienced space and imagined space in Jewish culture—both shaped by particular social and political contexts.⁶⁰ On the same subject, Anna Lipphardt, Julia Brauch, and Alexandra Nocke identify Jewish space as “Other” spaces—spaces that “challenge conventional conceptions of place and space.”⁶¹ Both of these texts note the central and historical importance of the Holy Land in shaping Jewish conceptions of place.⁶²

Beyond the purview of religious space, A. Finn Enke suggests in *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Movement Activism* not only that feminist movement activism involved both inhabiting and creating spaces but also that “social geographies and built environments *shaped activist communities*.”⁶³ Space, embodying tensions, contestations, and exclusions, was central, rather than peripheral, to the development of the movement.⁶⁴ Enke also notes that a framework of space offers an opportunity to explore a movement beyond the boundaries of “membership,” centering instead on participation in the negotiation of places.⁶⁵ Regarding the LGBTQ movement in particular, in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, Jean-Ulrick Désert identifies “queer space” as “an activated zone made proprietary by the occupant or *flâneur*, the wanderer... Queer space is in large part the function

⁵⁹ David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 12, 15, 17.

⁶⁰ Barbara E. Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 24.

⁶¹ Anna Lipphardt, Julia Brauch, and Alexandra Nocke, “Exploring Jewish Space,” in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place* (London: Routledge, 2016), 3.

⁶² Lipphardt, Brauch, and Nocke, 5.

⁶³ Finn Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 5. Emphasis is my own.

⁶⁴ Enke, 10-11.

⁶⁵ Enke, 11.

of wishful thinking or desires that become solidified: a seduction of the reading of space where queerness ... dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape.”⁶⁶ Queer space involves a redefinition of space itself.⁶⁷ Lastly, in the article “Mapping Queer Space,” Jane Garrity offers an understanding of queer space as “nonnormative locales that are physical, social, and constituted by and through social relations, as well as nonexclusionary and nonhomogenous locations that are largely or exclusively theoretical constructs (such as virtual spaces).”⁶⁸

Taken together, this wide array of literature on space and place emphasizes space as interpreted, contested, and symbolic; as physical, virtual, and imagined; as shaped by history, politics, power dynamics, and social norms; as formed by and shaping group identities. My exploration of the spaces and places of CBST in the 1970s offers a chance to synthesize and connect these multivalent interpretations and approaches to space and place. Lipphardt, Brauch, and Nocke especially inspire my approach to analyzing queer Jewish space by identifying Jewish places as “sites that are geographically located” and Jewish spaces as “spatial environments in which Jewish things happen, where Jewish activities are performed, and which in turn are shaped and defined by those Jewish activities.”⁶⁹ They can intersect, overlap, and align; they are interdependent and dynamic.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Jean-Ulrick Désert, “Queer Space,” in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 21.

⁶⁷ Désert, 22.

⁶⁸ Jane Garrity, “Mapping Queer Space,” *English Language Notes* 45, no. 2 (2007): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-45.2.1>.

⁶⁹ Lipphardt, Brauch, and Nocke, 4.

⁷⁰ Lipphardt, Brauch, and Nocke, 4.

The Shape of the Argument

This thesis explores the years between 1973 and 1979. During these years, CBST was heavily focused on finding, establishing, and renovating physical spaces of its own as it worked to build its congregation. These years also saw a notable influx of correspondence from gay Jews around the world, as well as a peak in coverage of and advertisements for religion in gay newspapers. Culturally, the year 1979 marked a big shift for CBST: Pinchas Ben Aharon, the congregation's volunteer rabbi, left the congregation, and CBST had to reimagine its religious leadership.⁷¹

CBST's archival collection, which is housed at the LGBT Community Center National History Archive in New York City, offered a wealth of materials for this thesis. I draw heavily on CBST's newsletter, *Gay Synagogue News*, which paints a detailed picture of what CBST looked like in its early days. As an institutional publication, the newsletter offers a curated view of the congregation, undoubtedly leaving out certain information and presenting stories in dramatized ways. I seek to balance these emphases by also drawing on meeting minutes, liturgy, ephemera, and recorded interviews with congregants. Items from the International Gay Information Center Collection and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Periodical Collection at the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library shed light on the wider landscape of 1970s gay religious groups, and I draw on newsletters and liturgy from their collections. I also utilize newspaper archives, primarily those of the *Advocate*, a gay newspaper in Los Angeles that had a national readership, which is accessible online via the LGBT Magazine Archive Collection.

⁷¹ Cohen, 35.

I argue that, in the 1970s, CBST engaged with, negotiated, or created three different spatial landscapes: a physical space, a discursive space, and a conceptual space of memory. This thesis contains three chapters, the first of which explores how CBST lent symbolic—Jewish and queer—meaning to its collective negotiation of physical space. This meaning generated a feeling of unity amongst congregants in the 1970s. The second chapter explores what it meant for CBST to have a broad constituency of community members who did not engage within the congregation’s physical space but were nevertheless deeply connected to the congregation. I propose that discursive spaces linked to CBST—nonphysical areas where individual members of subordinated groups communicated to articulate their own identities, interests, and needs—contributed to the formation of a widespread gay-Jewish consciousness.⁷² Finally, the third chapter investigates the role of memory, narrative, and commemoration in the formation and solidification of CBST, a synagogue increasingly thriving during the years of my exploration. It probes why the memory of CBST’s 1970s spaces remained potent for the congregation over the ensuing years and argues that memory itself served as a conceptual space within which gay Jews could unite.

Lastly, a note on terminology: today, CBST calls itself an LGBTQ congregation. However, in the 1970s, CBST and other queer congregations self-identified as “gay” or “gay and lesbian” synagogues. In this thesis, I refer to CBST and other religious institutions in the way that they referred to themselves at the time, as “gay” or “gay and lesbian.” I do this not to deny or reject the presence and importance of bisexual-, transgender-, and queer-identifying individuals, both now and in the 1970s, but rather to communicate how sexual identity was understood at the time and how these understandings shaped congregations. Terminology itself

⁷² Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/466240>, 67.

has always been a source of discussion within queer congregations, and in the 1970s, institutions such as CBST grappled, in particular, with the place of lesbians, who were minorities within their communities.⁷³ The label “gay and lesbian,” then, emphasizes how congregations were wrestling with the topic of gender. This terminology is therefore, for a multitude of reasons, historically relevant, and my usage of historical terms seeks to emphasize this point while also making the thesis more legible by aligning my terms with those used in the primary source material I bring in. I also refer to CBST’s correspondents by their initials, out of respect for their privacy.

⁷³ Cohen, 25.

Chapter One: Wandering

Making a Home

“We’re on the move!” said the front-page headline of CBST’s July 1975 newsletter: “After just two and one half years, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the Gay Synagogue of New York, has found a home of its own.”⁷⁴ For more than two years, CBST had gathered weekly in a community room at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Chelsea. After months of searching for new premises, seeking more room and access than the Holy Apostles room afforded, CBST had accepted a sixteen-month lease for a space in Greenwich Village’s Westbeth Artists Complex, which opened in 1970 to offer artists affordable housing and work spaces.⁷⁵ CBST rented its space from the arts group Video Exchange for \$600 a month, a sum that the congregation had raised through a pledge drive.⁷⁶

CBST had no choice but to move: in December of 1974, the congregation received word from Reverend Robert Weeks of Holy Apostles that CBST would need to find a new space. Holy Apostles sought again to be a parish church, serving neighborhood families, rather than a church that had specialized ministries, such as for the gay community. Reverend Weeks explained that the church’s policy that enabled it to lease space to gay and lesbian organizations was preventing local Chelsea families from feeling welcome. “I am proud of the way the Synagogue was started, with a few members in our Rectory basement two years ago,” Reverend Weeks wrote. “It is great that your membership is now ninety and above every Friday. I feel sure that it will be able to find a new home (as did the GLF, the GAA, the Church of the Beloved Disciple and the West Side

⁷⁴ “We’re on the Move!” *Gay Synagogue News*, July 1975, Box 4, Folder 82, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah Records, LGBT Community Center National History Archive, New York (hereafter cited as CBST Records).

⁷⁵ “History,” Westbeth Home to the Arts, accessed March 19, 2024, <https://westbeth.org/about/history>.

⁷⁶ “We’re on the Move!” *Gay Synagogue News*, July 1975; “Pledge Drive,” *Gay Synagogue News*, May 1975, Box 4, Folder 80, CBST Records.

Discussion Group) now that it has been assisted in ‘getting on its feet’ by incubation at our Church.”⁷⁷ He concluded his letter by stating that the congregation could stay for as long as it took to find a new location.⁷⁸

In response, the chairman of CBST’s Board of Trustees, Arnold Mandelbaum, expressed the congregation’s initial concern about the news but stated that it might be a “blessing in disguise”: “A more careful analysis of our situation has brought us to the determination to find quarters of our own that we can occupy exclusively without being subject to the convenience of others.”⁷⁹ He also expressed gratitude, writing, “It was you who provided encouragement and space for the small group that started the Gay Synagogue. And it was you who made the facilities of the church available first at no charge and then for a nominal rental during the critical formative months of the Synagogue. This we shall always remember with appreciation.”⁸⁰ This exchange demonstrated that CBST did not find being in a church problematic; rather, CBST recognized that without sole control over a space, it was subject to others’ demands and schedules. However, despite any stipulations from the host congregation, Mandelbaum emphasized, CBST had been granted space and encouragement, which allowed the synagogue to grow. This relationship was more complex than a purely spatial or financial one: Reverend Weeks, after all, characterized his church as an incubator for CBST, an interpretation that emphasized growth in a supportive environment.

And how CBST had grown! In the span of just two and a half years, the congregation had increased to 170 members.⁸¹ The Board of Trustees met monthly to oversee the synagogue and an assortment of regular and ad hoc committees.⁸² The regular committees organized different

⁷⁷ Robert Weeks to Paul Merling, December 15, 1974, Box 1, Folder 8, CBST Records.

⁷⁸ Weeks to Merling, December 15, 1974.

⁷⁹ Arnold Mandelbaum to Weeks, December 21, 1974, Box 1, Folder 8, CBST Records.

⁸⁰ Mandelbaum to Weeks, December 21, 1974.

⁸¹ “Membership,” *Gay Synagogue News*, December 1975, Box 4, Folder 87, CBST Records.

⁸² “Board,” *Gay Synagogue News*, June 1975, Box 4, Folder 81, CBST Records.

elements of synagogue life, from classes on Hebrew, Yiddish, and Kabbalah (the education committee) to advocacy efforts for gay rights and Soviet Jewry (the social action and Jewish affairs committees, respectively) and raffles to raise money for the synagogue (the fundraising committee). The publicity committee and the publications committee managed the production and dispersal of material about CBST, while the membership committee spearheaded annual membership drives.⁸³

From CBST's inception, however, the most important time of the week was Friday night, when the community gathered for Shabbat services. An oneg always followed, allowing congregants to schmooze and discuss a topic. Organized by the oneg committee, topics could include any range of subjects, from "Jews and the American Revolution" to gay Pride with "skits, stories and songs"; from Sephardic literature to "Borscht Belt humor" (referring to the Catskills getaways so popular among New York City Jews in the mid-20th century). Onegs were just as much, if not more, about socializing than about learning, and afterwards, the community gathered for folk dancing.⁸⁴ The oneg topics displayed CBST's deep investment in Jewish tradition and culture; yet these constants were also permeated by a distinctly queer sensibility.

In CBST's early years, people and ritual items constituted its space. CBST made the Holy Apostles community room its own by occupying the area with a minyan⁸⁵ and bringing in ritual items. The congregation constructed or borrowed what was necessary for services.⁸⁶ CBST used a Torah lent by Temple Shaaray Tefila, an Upper East Side Reform synagogue, for the High

⁸³ "Jewish Affairs," "Social Action," and "Fundraising," *Gay Synagogue News*, May 1975, Box 4, Folder 80, CBST Records.

⁸⁴ "Oneg Topics," *Gay Synagogue News*, June 1975-August 1975, Box 4, Folders 81-83, CBST Records.

⁸⁵ The number of people needed for collective worship; ten adults. See Judith R. Baskin, "Minyan," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 434.

⁸⁶ Marcia Chambers, "A Homosexual Temple Holds Rites on West Side," *New York Times*, December 23, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/23/archives/a-homosexual-temple-holds-rites-on-west-side-petition-for.html>; Carl Glassman, "Through a Glass Darkly... New York's Gay Synagogue," *Times of Israel and World Jewish Review*, 1975, Box 7, Folder 394, CBST Records.

Holidays in 1974. The Torah occupied a makeshift ark constructed out of a crate and a curtain. CBST used the borrowed Torah again in 1975, but by the 1976 High Holidays, the congregation had received a Torah on permanent loan from a congregation in the Bronx. Soon after CBST obtained the Torah, CBST congregant Lou Rittmaster was driving his Volkswagen Beetle across town to CBST when his boyfriend, Irving Cooperberg, an early CBST leader, told him to stop the car.⁸⁷

In the trash by the curb, there was a high chest of drawers, and Irving said, ‘Pull out the drawers, leave the drawers, we don’t want the drawers, just the skeleton.’ We threw that skeleton—brown wood chest of drawers—on my luggage rack. We brought it to shul. During the week, we gutted it. I think Harvey Berger got his staple gun and crazy glue and put material in the inside. We did a spring curtain rod with a curtain, and I brought my desk lamp from home the next week. That was the eternal light.⁸⁸

CBST’s lack of its own space and ritual items meant that congregants engaged in collective improvisation. Constructing a physical environment suited to Jewish ritual was a unifying act for the emerging congregation.

So, too, was the process of finding a new home. After receiving word from Reverend Weeks that CBST would have to leave Holy Apostles, the synagogue lost no time in locating new premises. In order to do so, CBST would have both to find a suitable place and to raise the money necessary to rent it, feats that required a lot of community support. The process of finding a new location was truly a group effort: the Board of Trustees made sure to run decisions by the general membership, which held several votes over the course of the process to discuss and decide upon budgets, locations, and contracts.⁸⁹ CBST’s lay-led leadership structure centered

⁸⁷ Cohen, 141-42. The eternal light is the light above the ark in synagogues that is always lit, signifying God’s omnipresence. See Baskin, “Ner Tamid,” 455.

⁸⁸ Lou Rittmaster, interview by Aliza Schwartz and Adam Graubart, January 27, 2023, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIX_XYHtb8Y&t=2s.

⁸⁹ Cohen, 23-24.

around collective decision making, which meant that big decisions such as locating new premises automatically involved coming together as a community.



Figure 3. A Rosh Hashanah dinner at Bethune Street, mid-1970s. The set of drawers-turned-ark is on the left with the white curtain covering it (photo courtesy of the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network).

As for relocation, the community was all in: in April 1975, *Gay Synagogue News* reported on the “remarkably successful start” of the building fund, which had held several fundraising sessions.⁹⁰ The success of the fundraising sessions was a testament to the extent to which members were invested (and literally did invest) in this effort to find a home. The wish for every “friend of our community” to contribute reflected a need for money, but it also reflected how the building fund provided a concrete way for members to contribute to CBST’s future—to literally help build the congregation and community. In March of 1975, *Gay Synagogue News* reported that a “feeling of ‘let’s go’” was very much alive among congregants, noting, “The Fund Raising Committee and the Board are ecstatic that the congregation is so anxious to begin

⁹⁰ “Membership OKs Higher Budget,” *Gay Synagogue News*, April 1975, Box 4, Folder 79, CBST Records.

raising the money for our new home.”⁹¹ The fervor that the housing search and fundraising efforts reportedly inspired within the congregation emphasized that negotiating synagogue space was something congregants could enthusiastically unite behind.

Symbolic Space

The language used by the community to describe space emphasized the collectivity that constructing space could generate. By drawing upon the idea of “home,” CBST communicated that a space to worship was more than just four walls; ideally, it was a sanctuary for queer Jews. By speaking about finding a “home,” particularly a “home of its own,” CBST assigned symbolic value to the process of navigating New York City’s rental market and lent meaning to the congregation’s experiences of construction and relocation. This symbolism had religious resonance: the space of worship is extremely important in Jewish tradition. As Pinchas Ben Aharon, the volunteer rabbi, described in a Torah commentary for *Gay Synagogue News* in 1976, Parshat Terumah in the Book of Exodus describes the building of the Tabernacle, “the portable sanctuary the Jews were to carry with them in their wanderings in the wilderness.”⁹² Ben Aharon interpreted the Tabernacle as a representation of unity under God: “Just as the Tabernacle, made up of so many different parts, is really one,” he wrote, “similarly the apparent multiplicity of the world ultimately reveals the essential unity of its Creator.”⁹³ The haftarah, the accompanying verses from the Prophets, for that same week recounted the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, which Ben Aharon described as “the ‘permanent’ counterpart of the temporary Tabernacle.”⁹⁴ He then said, “Apply the last three verses to our Synagogue!”⁹⁵

⁹¹ “Membership Meeting: March 13th,” *Gay Synagogue News*, March 1975, Box 4, Folder 78, CBST Records.

⁹² Pinchas Ben Aharon, “Hidden Treasures,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 1976, Box 4, Folder 89, CBST Records.

⁹³ Ben Aharon, “Hidden Treasures,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 1976.

⁹⁴ Ben Aharon, “Hidden Treasures,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 1976.

⁹⁵ Ben Aharon, “Hidden Treasures,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 1976.

The verses in question, I Kings 6:11-13, go as follows:

Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon, “Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.”⁹⁶

Clearly, CBST’s process of building a home and community meant far more than identifying a location and gaining more members. Ben Aharon did not draw such direct parallels every week. By identifying this haftarah as particularly resonant for the community, Ben Aharon invoked the spiritual significance of community-building: constructing a home meant establishing a meaningful relationship with God. Indeed, in his reading of the following week’s parshat and haftarah—readings still about the Tabernacle and the Temple—Ben Aharon wrote, “The prophet reminds us of the Temple in ruins and spurs us on to work towards its rebuilding. How do you interpret this in light of the concept of our Synagogue as the Temple in miniature?”⁹⁷

In his commentaries about the parshat and haftarah portions for the rest of the month, which continued to tell the stories of the Tabernacle and the Temple, Ben Aharon drew more parallels between the scripture and CBST. Describing the haftarah for Parshat Vayyakhel, the Torah portion that describes the process of building the Tabernacle with items volunteered by the community, Ben Aharon said,

This story, as well as all the Parshot and Haftorot we read this month, can easily be interpreted, on a material level, in terms of the physical maintenance of our Synagogue. Think about them also in symbolic terms however, and see how they speak very directly to our need for constant attention to our own spiritual well-being, both as individuals and in terms of the Congregation as a whole.⁹⁸

As Ben Aharon emphasized in his summaries, engaging with space literally also represented an engagement with symbolic processes of community-building. For CBST, this certainly rang true:

⁹⁶ I Kings 6:11-13 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁹⁷ Ben Aharon, “Hidden Treasures,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 1976.

⁹⁸ Ben Aharon, “Hidden Treasures,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 1976.

by collectively creating space, and by assigning symbolic meaning to relocating and collaborating to build a new space, CBST united as a congregation. Engagement with space thus represented the building of a community, something that Ben Aharon recognized when he drew a parallel between CBST's experience and the above Torah and haftarah portions.

Regarding gay or lesbian identity, the concepts of “home” and of the construction of community were similarly potent. Home was often linked to the heterosexual “ideal” in the United States. It was home—particularly the white suburban home—and domesticity that were linked to national stability in the post-World War II era.⁹⁹ Gay and lesbian individuals, and particularly gay men, were popularly positioned as “foils to the heterosexual home.”¹⁰⁰ Stephen Vider, in *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity After World War II*, frames homemaking as a performance: “Through the everyday acts of creating, maintaining, and being at home... [individuals] designate a space as their own.”¹⁰¹ As Vider explains, “The presumed privacy of home had made it particularly important for many LGBTQ people as a space to safely, and often secretly, express their identities and build social and sexual connections, beyond the gaze of disapproving neighbors, employers, family members, and the police.”¹⁰² The language of “home,” then, could carry with it, for gay and lesbian individuals, a sense of safety and freedom, as well as a sense of satisfaction claiming a space that many denied them.

The common thread, at least for CBST, was liberation. In 1976, the Oneg Committee deemed the month including the festival of Shavuot, Gay Pride, and the American Bicentennial to be “liberation month,” so that “every Oneg during this period will deal with our emerging

⁹⁹ Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity After World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 3, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Vider, 16.

¹⁰¹ Vider, 7.

¹⁰² Vider, 12.

liberation as Jews, gays and Americans.”¹⁰³ In particular, the onegs were to involve a celebration for Shavuot, the theme of “Great American Gay Personalities” as well as an “original musical comedy” entitled “Some Connption” (“with new songs, new gags and a great cast”) to celebrate Pride, and lastly, to honor the bicentennial, an exploration of “what ‘the Goldena Medina’ [golden land] has meant to the successive waves of Jewish immigrants who were given a chance to share in the American dream.”¹⁰⁴ The theme of liberation allowed gay and lesbian Jews to unite their sexual and Jewish, particularly Jewish-American, identities.

Central to liberation in all of these contexts was the theme of space and of liberation via migration to a new place. The festival of Shavuot recognizes when God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, thereby establishing a covenant after the Israelites’ escape from Egypt (it is also a harvest festival).¹⁰⁵ In more recent memory, CBST identified the liberating significance of Jewish immigration to the United States, which peaked between 1880 and 1924, when 2.5 million Jews arrived from Eastern Europe (nearly 85 percent of whom made New York City their home).¹⁰⁶ By focusing on the symbolic ideas of the “American dream” and the “golden land,” CBST emphasized the meaning of the United States as a place of sanctuary for Jewish immigrants. And, though we cannot now know what the original musical comedy “Some Connption” precisely involved aside from its songs and gags, the accompanying event, the Christopher Street Liberation Day march, represented a literal claiming of space by gay and lesbian individuals. The significance of the occasion went beyond the parade itself, however: for many, “liberation” involved an internal journey and often a literal migration to a place such as

¹⁰³ “Liberation Month,” *Gay Synagogue News*, June 1976, Box 4, Folder 93, CBST Records.

¹⁰⁴ “Liberation Month,” *Gay Synagogue News*, June 1976.

¹⁰⁵ See Paul Steinberg, *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays: Passover, Lag B’Omer, Shavuot, Tisha B’Av* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 135, 147-48.

¹⁰⁶ Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 111.

New York City.¹⁰⁷ CBST discussed the idea of “home” in the context of finding new premises, but the idea of “home,” with its deep meanings within both Jewish and gay culture, came to characterize not just the physical space but also the kinship and collectivity of the congregation.

Central to such journeys was the literal and symbolic experience of wandering. CBST’s numerous moves provided an opportunity to assign an important symbolism to the period of wandering it experienced. Over the course of CBST’s first three years, the congregation inhabited a wide variety of locations, each linked to some element of CBST’s identity. Holy Apostles, like CBST, was a progressive congregation. The West Side Center, where CBST held its 1974 Chanukah party and 1975 Purim party, was a gay and lesbian organization.¹⁰⁸ The Church of the Beloved Disciple, a fellow gay congregation, hosted CBST’s High Holiday services in 1974.¹⁰⁹

In February of 1977, members and friends on CBST’s mailing list received the congregation’s monthly newsletter, *Gay Synagogue News*, which had a particularly exciting front-page headline: “Time to Unpack.” The article began, “After forty years of wandering, the children of Israel reached the Promised Land. After only four years of wandering, our congregation has found a home. It is not yet the Promised Land, but with a little work and spirit it will do nicely for the next five years.”¹¹⁰ Six months earlier, the congregation had been forced to relocate from its sublet loft, the one the congregation obtained in 1975, to an alternative space on Bethune Street in the Westbeth Complex. For this new rental, a 7,000 square foot space, CBST’s members and Board of Trustees voted to accept a five-year lease.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ D’Emilio, 31.

¹⁰⁸ Minutes, November 7, 1974, Box 1, Folder 8, CBST Records; Minutes, March 4, 1975, Box 1, Folder 9, CBST Records; Christopher D. Brazee, “West Side Discussion Group Center,” NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, last modified 2016, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/west-side-discussion-group-center/>.

¹⁰⁹ Board of Trustees Minutes, August 13, 1974, Box 1, Folder 8, CBST Records.

¹¹⁰ “Time to Unpack,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 1977, Box 4, Folder 101, CBST Records.

¹¹¹ Cohen, 24.



Figure 4. CBST's Bethune Street location, 1977 (photo courtesy of the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network).

Nevertheless, *Gay Synagogue News* hardly reported on the physical space itself and what it meant for the congregation. Rather, “Time to Unpack” described the process of obtaining the lease. The article emphasized the multiple votes the community had taken to agree upon a long-term space. It described the work of the search committee, which had identified other possible locations. It shared that a new committee had been established, one that would field members’ proposals for the redecoration of the Westbeth loft. Lastly, it noted that members would all be able to participate in improving the premises. Rather than focusing on the practical benefits of a settled location that a long-term lease would allow, the article underscored the community effort that was involved in obtaining the lease in the first place, as well as the opportunities for further cooperation: “After a plan is adopted, every member will have an opportunity to contribute their muscle power to put it into effect,” the article stated.¹¹² In this

¹¹² “Time to Unpack,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 1977.

announcement about a new location, CBST highlighted a sense of collectivity and cohesion that the work of making a viable physical space for the congregation produced.

While the congregation had united in the practical process of identifying a long-term location, a more figurative sense of oneness also accompanied this change to new space. Indeed, *Gay Synagogue News* gave an important symbolic meaning to CBST's long-term lease when it interpreted CBST's journey to the Westbeth loft through a biblical lens, comparing the congregation's experience to that of the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. And this symbolic meaning came not from the destination but from the process of getting there—the congregation wandering for four years as the Israelites had for forty.

By likening CBST's journey toward a space of its own to biblical stories of wandering, the congregation linked Jewish to gay and lesbian tradition. Wandering as a concept is not in and of itself queer, of course, nor is it intrinsically Jewish or religious; however, the ways in which CBST described its wandering process conveniently served to unite its queerness and Judaism. CBST's placelessness, like that of other gay and lesbian synagogues and churches, was inextricably tied to its gay and lesbian orientation. This is not to say that other, non-gay congregations easily or immediately found locations of their own, but gay congregations faced particular challenges in terms of finding accommodation. The gay synagogue in Miami, Congregation Etz Chaim, for instance, was forced to relocate out of a Lutheran church when the church board realized it was a *gay* synagogue. MCC-LA was similarly evicted twice, and various MCC locations faced arson attacks in the 1970s.¹¹³ Other factors undoubtedly influenced congregations' ability to find space, but the problem of access for gay and lesbian individuals was always present.

¹¹³ Heather White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 157.

The symbolism of wandering was also meaningful in light of the journey that many gay and lesbian individuals took both conceptually, to self-understanding, and literally, to communities in which they could freely be themselves. Many gay and lesbian people moved, for instance, to New York City to join a gay and lesbian community. For the members of CBST, many had “wandered” away from or compartmentalized their Judaism, and CBST represented the place to which they finally journeyed as part of their personal quest.¹¹⁴

CBST was not the only gay synagogue or gay congregation to interpret the experience of wandering through a biblical lens. Congregation Etz Chaim wrote in 1983, “When our host announced that he had to give up his studio, we felt like the lost tribe. The question ‘Where shall we go from here?’ was asked again.”¹¹⁵ By comparing the synagogue community to the lost tribes of Israel, the congregation situated itself squarely within Jewish scriptural tradition. Further, the account continually repeated the line, “Again we asked the question ‘Where shall we go from here?’”¹¹⁶ This perhaps echoed the poetics of the various wanderings of the Hebrew Bible, again building a congregational history that directly evoked and invoked Jewish tradition. The *Advocate* similarly reported as follows on MCC’s first service in its new building: “Recalling the frustration of the Israelite King David, whose dream of raising a temple had to wait for realization by Solomon, his successor, Rev. Perry said there had been times when he wondered if he would ever live to see MCC in a building of its own.”¹¹⁷ The Bible served as a lens through which to analyze the process of homecoming for these congregations. In so

¹¹⁴ Cohen, 18, 29.

¹¹⁵ “Congregation Etz Chaim: The Metropolitan Community Synagogue of Greater Miami,” 1983, Box 10, Folder 25, Twice Blessed Collection, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Gale Primary Sources, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/AQUKHT541888089/AHSI?u=columbiau&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=71b4b72c&pg=6>.

¹¹⁶ “Congregation Etz Chaim,” 1983.

¹¹⁷ Rob Cole, “MCC is Home: Over 1000 Attend Dedication Service in Los Angeles,” *Advocate*, March 31, 1971.

situating themselves, the congregations could claim a place within their respective religious traditions while also claiming the Bible for their queer congregations.

This was an example of what historian Gregg Drinkwater calls “transformative integration.” Drinkwater explains that the “dual emphasis on building a new liberatory Judaism for gay and lesbian people while also contributing to a transformation of Judaism broadly was, at times, in tension and at other times in harmony, with each goal dialectically in service of the other, in keeping with the idea of transformative integration”¹¹⁸ This simultaneously claimed religion for queer people and foregrounded the goal of making the American religious mainstream more accepting towards queer people. And a central means of doing just that was for gay congregations to claim spaces of their own—precisely the context of CBST’s performance of this transformative integration.

Establishment

CBST was not alone in assigning symbolic meaning to matters of location. In 1977, reporter James Saslow wrote an article in the *Advocate* about seeking a spiritual space on Christmas Eve. He reflected on the gay religious movement, writing, “We are only beginning to build churches, and have subsisted for the most part in the basements of kindly orthodox congregations or in rented storefronts. Which is fine in its way, and it feeds our revolutionary fervor to tuck our own nascent institutions like hermit crabs into the cast-off shells of a decaying society.”¹¹⁹ To Saslow, the tendency to house gay congregations inside existing institutions was a reflection not of a deep-set societal homophobia that limited groups’ options, or of economic factors; rather, Saslow interpreted this pattern symbolically, as both a manifestation and a

¹¹⁸ Drinkwater, 280.

¹¹⁹ James Saslow, “Orestes at Midnight Mass,” *Advocate*, January 12, 1977.

reinforcement of the gay and lesbian community's "revolutionary fervor."¹²⁰ Inhabiting locations such as other religious institutions, theaters, clubs, and even classrooms emphasized for these communities the very queerness of their religious pursuits. This was not a capitulation to the status quo but an active construction of a new, energetic, and questing form of religious community. Saslow's analysis emphasized how space had the potential to represent more than just a physical accommodation for gay and lesbian groups.

Yet Saslow went on to say that on certain days like Christmas Eve, there existed a desire within the queer community to "participate honestly and wholeheartedly in the shared rituals of the *entire* culture."¹²¹ Queer wandering was therefore juxtaposed with gay and lesbian people's yearning for situatedness—for establishment as an institution. The quest of queer religious institutions for permanent spaces of their own can be understood, then, as a craving for visibility as *gay* religious institutions, a feat that they could only achieve by claiming spaces of their own. Buildings signified, for gay Jews, an alignment with tradition, communicating legitimization as an established synagogue.¹²² And as a *gay* community, space also represented stability. As Irving Cooperberg, an early leader of CBST, put it in a 1985 interview, "Somehow, bricks and mortar and putting that whole thing together gives a legitimacy, gives a permanence to our community."¹²³ By acquiring an independent space, he explained, gay and lesbian individuals felt more assured about an institution's sturdiness. Seeking establishment, then, was not an act of acquiescence to the institutional status quo but rather a statement of visibility, strength, and legitimacy, both within and outside of the gay and lesbian community.

¹²⁰ Saslow, "Orestes at Midnight Mass," January 12, 1977.

¹²¹ Saslow, "Orestes at Midnight Mass," January 12, 1977.

¹²² Aliza Maggid, "Joining Together: Building a Worldwide Movement," in *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*, ed. Christie Balka and Andy Rose (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 166.

¹²³ Irving Cooperberg, "Neighborhood Voices: Irving Cooperberg," Lesbian Herstory Archives AudioVisual Collections, 1985, <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/items/show/980>.

Over the course of the 1970s, negotiating space offered multiple opportunities for CBST to unite its congregation. This was not necessarily a conscious or intentional bonding effort. The Jewish and queer resonances of space meant that the negotiations thereof offered an opportunity to symbolically bring together Jewish and queer identities, which was CBST's mission writ large. CBST heavily emphasized the power gained by having a physical space of the congregation's own in which to gather. However, by assigning meaning to the experience of wandering and to the idea of a "home of our own," CBST also demonstrated that the congregation derived meaning from the collective experience of wishing and working for space as much as the physical space itself. CBST was not alone in assigning symbolic and narrative meaning to its spaces: the press similarly emphasized these themes, shaping, reinforcing, and spreading the symbolism of space for gay synagogues.

Chapter Two: Dear CBST...

In 1978, “FB” wrote to CBST from Kyoto, Japan. He said the following:

Shalom Kind Sirs,

I am hoping you will be enabled to answer a few of my questions re: the life in Israel. I’ve been here in Japan for some years and am quite anxious about my upcoming move to Eretz Yisrael ... will be my first trip there. Though we do have a dispersed community here in Kyoto there remains no central meeting place nor general interest in such. It will be wonderful to join an appropriate community there in Israel; I’m very much looking forward to this. Can you advise re: contacts anywhere in Israel (individual and/or communal)? I should appreciate hearing news of your community there in New York also. One more thing ... the Sauna & Steam Bath scenes here in Japan are ubiquitous as are the bars. What of Yisrael? Hoping to hear from you soon, I remain

Faithfully yours,

FB¹²⁴

FB, an American from San Francisco, had lived in Japan for 7 years, and he planned to move to Israel in the near future. In the process of planning this move, he wrote CBST a letter that would be scarcely intelligible both to the straight Jew and to the non-Jewish gay person. Using Hebrew words such as “shalom” and discussing Israel within this context, both common in Jewish-American discourse, emphasized FB’s Jewishness. FB’s references to “the life,” “an appropriate community,” and the sauna, steam bath, and bar “scenes,” on the other hand, underscored FB’s homosexuality. In order to fully understand this letter, readers had to be well versed in both Jewish-American and gay discourse.

Over the course of the 1970s, CBST received many such letters from gay Jews across the country and world. Many letters requested a subscription to *Gay Synagogue News*; others sought to be connected to local gay-Jewish groups or to pen pals with whom they could correspond. Some asked for advice or information about CBST and the wider gay-Jewish community, and some just wanted directions to the synagogue. CBST’s volunteer secretaries replied to many of

¹²⁴ FB to CBST, June 28, 1975, Box 7, Folder 379, CBST Records.

the inquiries, answering questions and sending issues of *Gay Synagogue News* and brochures about the congregation.

Judging from the volume of letters in annual correspondence folders within CBST's archive, far more people wrote to CBST in the 1970s than in the 1980s. There were a few practical reasons for the earlier influx of letters. To begin with, until 1979, when CBST acquired an answering machine, people could only get in touch with the congregation by showing up at services or by writing a letter.¹²⁵ Calling CBST's telephone number would provide people only with information about Shabbat services. The lay volunteers who led the congregation had day jobs and could not staff a telephone, and so a recorded tape giving information about services had to suffice.¹²⁶ CBST's lack of a functional telephone system reflected the synagogue's early organizational capacity, which, in turn, reflected the ways in which CBST was different from mainstream synagogues. The lack of a formal secretarial staff limited the options for other forms of communication and outreach.

Factors other than the acquisition of an answering machine almost certainly also influenced the decrease in the number of letters CBST received. After CBST's founding, more gay synagogues formed across the United States and in several countries across the world, and people who sought gay synagogues began to find them closer to home. What was once, for many, a foreign idea—that a person could attend synagogue as an openly gay or lesbian individual—likely became less so, no doubt in part because of the work of congregations like CBST.

The number of letters the congregation received over the span of six years hardly matched the number of people who showed up to Shabbat services on any given Friday night by

¹²⁵ "Miscellany," *Gay Synagogue News*, March 1979, Box 4, Folder 125, CBST Records.

¹²⁶ Michael Levine to AB, September 18, 1977, Box 7, Folder 381, CBST Records.

the mid-to-late 1970s.¹²⁷ Yet that does not mean that this body of correspondence was inconsequential. The breadth of correspondence with CBST between 1974 and 1979, as well as the broad readership of *Gay Synagogue News*, reflected a congregation that extended to a far wider constituency of Jews than its in-person community—a rare occurrence for a synagogue in the 1970s.¹²⁸ Of course, these categories were not mutually exclusive: some of the people who wrote letters to CBST did visit the congregation, and members, of course, received and read *Gay Synagogue News*. What is certain, however, is that CBST's community extended greatly beyond its physical space and even beyond the wider spatial context of New York City. The impact of CBST reached people such as FB who would likely never set foot inside CBST's physical space. By drawing on both Jewish-American and gay discourse, experiences, and themes, this body of correspondence, as well as the extent of CBST's virtual engagement, displayed the development of a wider gay-Jewish consciousness, which was deeply connected to CBST despite emerging within discursive, rather than physical, spaces.

Gay Communication Networks and the Press

CBST, like other gay and lesbian religious institutions, relied on existing gay and lesbian communication networks to grow its physical community. These communication networks were often inextricably linked to gay spaces. Indeed, one of CBST's advertising strategies was to put pamphlets in such locales, including bars, baths, and bookstores.¹²⁹ Some congregants also learned about CBST at the meetings of gay political organizations such as the Gay Activists Alliance and the Gay Task Force.¹³⁰ Word of the new gay synagogue spread largely via existing gay communication networks that were grounded within gay spaces.

¹²⁷ Cohen, 25.

¹²⁸ Alfred F. Daiboch, Memo to Board of Trustees, August 2, 1976, Box 1, Folder 13, CBST Records.

¹²⁹ Board of Trustees Minutes, October 10, 1974, Box 1, Folder 8, CBST Records.

¹³⁰ Daiboch, Memo, August 2, 1976.

The other key source of CBST's growth was the press, particularly gay and alternative newspapers. Some coverage from mainstream and Jewish newspapers also spread word about the new congregation, and CBST frequently advertised in the *New York Times*, too. An advertisement in New York's alternative weekly paper the *Village Voice* is often credited with kickstarting CBST, and the congregation continued to advertise there, as well as in the *Advocate* and occasionally in other gay papers.¹³¹ These advertisements taught readers—both local and afar—about the existence of CBST, but they also broadcast the whereabouts of the synagogue. Since the premises changed rather frequently in the early days, CBST utilized the press to communicate its physical location. CBST's membership grew rapidly because of these channels of information exchange, a growth that influenced the ultimate creation of a more widespread community.

Thus, through these channels, word of CBST reached far more people across America and internationally than was reflected in the congregation's local membership. For those who could not come to CBST in person, reading the newsletter or corresponding with the congregation was an act of situating themselves within a gay-Jewish community and consciousness. In the article "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Nancy Fraser coins the term "subaltern counterpublics" to describe "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."¹³² CBST created this type of space, an intangible area in which gay Jews could think about and articulate for themselves their identities, perspectives, and desires.

¹³¹ Cohen, 14.

¹³² Fraser, 67.

As a synagogue, CBST was exceptional for receiving so much correspondence. Yet as a gay and lesbian organization, CBST was entirely unexceptional in this regard. Since the emergence of gay organizations in the 1950s, groups that catered to gay and lesbian individuals were inundated with letters. Correspondence had long provided a way for gay and lesbian people to gather information and find community at a distance.¹³³ So, too, had gay newspapers: early papers in the 1950s, including those of early gay rights groups like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, attracted national attention and often inspired people to write letters to the organizations themselves.¹³⁴ The 1960s saw the development of “underground” or “alternative” papers, which, while not oriented exclusively towards queer audiences, often covered news of the gay community.¹³⁵ More gay-specific newspapers also became popular. In 1967, the *Advocate* was founded, emerging out of an activist group publication, *PRIDE Newsletter*. While LA-based, the *Advocate* quickly gained national prominence, reaching a biweekly schedule by 1970 and printing 40,000 copies by 1974.¹³⁶ By the fall of 1969, after Stonewall, gay liberationists were founding publications of their own, and many regional gay newspapers came into existence in the 1970s.¹³⁷ Discursive spaces and communication networks offered gay and lesbian individuals information, a sense of community, and, importantly, a new collective consciousness.

The ways in which gay media approached the topic of religion in the 1970s both reflected and contributed to the development of this gay-religious consciousness. On February 1, 1969, months before Stonewall, the *Advocate* covered the opening of the MCC branch in Los Angeles

¹³³ Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communication and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 104-105, 180.

¹³⁴ Tracy Baim, “Gay Newspapers: An Overview,” in *Gay Press, Gay Power: The Growth of LGBT Community Newspapers in America* (Chicago: Prairie Avenue Productions and Windy City Media Group, 2012), 84-86.

¹³⁵ Baim, 86-87; Benjamin Serby, “‘Not to Produce Newspapers, but Committed Radicals’: The Underground Press, the New Left, and the Gay Liberation Counterpublic in the United States, 1965-1976,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 32, no. 1 (2023): 6-8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7560/JHS32101>.

¹³⁶ Baim, 91-92.

¹³⁷ Baim, 94, 98.

in an article entitled “‘God Loves All’: Bold, New Church Welcomes Gays.” The piece began, “Thumbing through the *ADVOCATE* awhile back, quickly scanning a few articles and ads, my eyes came to a screeching halt for a moment. There, in a medium-sized ad was one for a CHURCH! It included a rather striking picture of the pastor, a Rev. Troy Perry of the Metropolitan Community Church in Huntington Park. I read the ad thought ‘that’s different’ and went on to another page.”¹³⁸ The article then described the nascent congregation and its pastor, the Reverend Troy Perry (down to his height, weight, “hypnotically intense hazel eyes,” and “soft southern accent,” details that themselves seem to reflect the classified ads and gay cultural discourse of the era).¹³⁹ The author noted MCC’s rapid growth since its founding the previous October, its religious diversity, and its service style (“ritualistic, but simple, with a little Fundamentalist fire thrown in”). It also mentions the late start time—1:30PM—“so folks like you and me who have been kept up late on Saturday night with a sick friend (!) can still make it.”¹⁴⁰ This article, like MCC itself, married religion and queer culture rather than pitting them against each other. However, the article’s opening, describing the author’s surprise at seeing the MCC ad, surely reflected the assumption that gay people would not be involved in organized religion.

The back of that same *Advocate* issue featured a display ad for the Holy Apostles’ church beneath an ad for an opera club and next to an article about gay culture. The advertisement, the sole broadcast in the *Advocate* for a gay religious institution, merely stated, “Hear Rev. Troy D. Perry Every Sunday 1:30pm.”¹⁴¹ However, by 1974, the *Advocate* dedicated entire pages to the subject of religion and to advertisements for gay and lesbian congregations. For instance, when

¹³⁸ A.B.T., “‘God Loves All’: Bold, New Church Welcomes Gays,” *Advocate*, February 1, 1969.

¹³⁹ A.B.T., “‘God Loves All,’” February 1, 1969.

¹⁴⁰ A.B.T., “‘God Loves All,’” February 1, 1969.

¹⁴¹ Metropolitan Community Church display advertisement, *Advocate*, February 1, 1969.

CBST advertised its High Holiday services in the September 11, 1974 issue of the *Advocate*, the ad was placed next to display ads for the Tampa MCC and the Long Beach MCC. Also on the page were display ads for the MCC in the Valley and MCC Miami, and directly above CBST's ad were articles about MCC and gay Lutherans. Astonishingly, this page amounted to only one segment of the *Advocate's* coverage of religion that week. The previous page included an article about a Catholic column that was dropped from the *Michigan Catholic* because the author was revealed to be the head of Dignity. The following page included a lengthy report on MCC's fifth general conference and an article about how an anti-nudity resolution failed to pass at the conference, as well as display ads for MCC branches and Congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim.

Letters ... From Page 20

essence plan. I KNOW that they know what goes on in Griffith Park, and still I go to take my chances.

"Why?" would be the logical question. First, I am not one of those who need the thrill of possible discovery; nor am I one of those who stand around in a brief belling suit attempting to exhibit myself to all those passing. The answer is really quite simple. I prefer to take chances on recognizing the vice in the light of day and in the open spaces of the park. Why expose myself to random arrest in the dark confines of one of the Hollywood bars? We all know people who have been subjected to this random arrest, and have truly done nothing against the law. A close friend of mine was recently arrested in Silverlake before he even had time to order a beer. He had done nothing but commit the crime of walking into the bar and sitting down. My friend was not prowling the paths of the park, nor does he. My friend was not walking the streets, nor does he. He simply had the bad sense to think he could enjoy a peaceful beer in a quiet Silverlake bar. I'm proud to say that he took his case to court and won. It cost him \$1,000, but he did not back down, and he won.

What's the point to all this? Number one reason is to tell you, why I go to the park. Number two reason is to beg of you, the ADVOICATE, to continue your work in helping the homosexual to know the rights he has and to stand up for those rights. Why won't the bars of Los Angeles stand up and join to be counted in supporting the right of the homosexual to sit quietly sipping a beer without fearing for his personal physical safety and financial security? Are they too hungry for the dollar of the Gay to recognize his rights to ordinary citizenship? Some are interested. I know, and to Los of The Patch, for one. I am sincerely grateful for his stand. I am sincerely hopeful that the ADVOICATE, The Patch, and many others will join together to fight for the lowly social animal... the homosexual.

L. T. H.
Los Angeles, Calif.

Editor:

One would hope that a paper that caters to homosexuals would represent their outlook and, at least, not offend any segment of the community. Such was not the case in last month's "Having Sex in the Park."

While it is true that most homosexuals do not frequent the park, I doubt that they would agree with Mr. Winston that those who do are immorally irresponsible, immature, and "hungry." As if this was not enough, Mr. Winston goes on to write what must be the ultimate contempt, "... and a headache for the Hollywood vice squad." Contrary to what Mr. Winston has written, I believe, the majority of those arrested have never been observed doing anything against the law.

Many homosexuals do not take for granted the view that sex is private. Having sex in the park is perfectly justified as long as one is not offended.

1968

LOS ANGELES ADVOCATE 21

Also, there are practical considerations, such as the convenience to married men and those who work nights. Some are too young for the bars; others just happen to dig sex under the skies. A great many feel that the secrecy the parks affords is more conducive to meeting people and making friends.

M. M.
Los Angeles, Calif.

ENJOY THE FRIENDLY ATMOSPHERE
OF
JOKER INN
4007 SUNSET BLVD.
Bartenders
Ron & Bill & Game & Terry

HEAR
REV.
TROY
D.
PERRY
Every
Sunday
1:30pm

Metropolitan Community Church
Temporarily meeting at:
6205 Miles Ave., Huntington Park,
Phone: 581-9264 90265

of all the
western bars
7864
Santa Monica Blvd.

[illegible]

Figures 5 and 6. The first Advocate advertisement for MCC in 1968 (right), and a 1974 Advocate advertisement for CBST, on the bottom left of the page, surrounded by other advertisements for gay congregations, as well as articles about religion (photo courtesy of the Advocate, LGBT Magazine Archive, ProQuest).

The dramatic change from a single display ad for a gay congregation in 1969 to nearly three full pages of ads and articles about religion only five years later reflected a shift in the visual landscape of a widely-read newspaper written for the gay community. In “A Revolution in Ephemera: Feminist Newsletters and Newspapers of the 1970s,” Agatha Beins emphasizes the significance of “spatial intertextuality” within feminist movement periodicals, positing that “an individual piece (an article, poem, essay, etc.) gains meaning in relation to the other items on the page.”¹⁴² Beins positions periodicals “as more than containers of content,” recognizing them as conduits of information and communication but also as having the ability to introduce readers to a movement and galvanize them.¹⁴³ With this in mind, the visual shift in the *Advocate* can be seen as both reflecting the growth of gay religious institutions and communicating a sense of cohesion among these institutions. Grouped together spatially, articles about and advertisements for gay religious groups collectively communicated that the gay religious movement was able to claim space within the precincts of the paper: the printing of these ads and articles legitimized the significance and value of the gay-religious movement, especially at a time when many congregations did not have physical spaces of their own. That an ad for CBST was placed in this section reflected an understanding that gay religious groups were part of the same conceptual universe. In these ways, the *Advocate*’s spatial landscape contributed to the development of a cohesive gay-religious consciousness.

So, too, did discourse about religion in the gay and lesbian community more generally. By the late 1960s, responding to the founding and growth of MCC, many in the gay and lesbian community seemed taken aback by the idea of a gay church. MCC drew a lot of attention and

¹⁴² Agatha Beins, “A Revolution in Ephemera: Feminist Newsletters and Newspapers of the 1970s,” in *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics*, ed. Cecilia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 49.

¹⁴³ Beins, 60-61.

debate that focused on questions of conformity to organized religion, especially in light of the rising discourse of gay liberation. At the crux of this discourse was the question of whether religion was inherently antithetical to this new movement. The debate raged in the correspondence sections of newspapers such as the *Advocate*, which, though to some extent curated by an editorial hand, presumably reflected conversations on the ground.

In the 1970s, the letters to the editor published in the *Advocate* often promoted a sense of religious dichotomy: one could be religious or anti-religion, but there seems to have been little space in between the two. For instance, one person wrote in saying, “It has always mystified me that any gay person who has attained the age of reason would choose or continue to pursue a religious mode of life. In so doing, one is embracing the poisons of one's enemies, regardless of the means by which one obscures that realization from oneself.”¹⁴⁴ Many others agreed with this sentiment, expressing impatience with the *Advocate*'s coverage of religion on the grounds that religion was fundamentally antithetical to and oppressive of homosexuality.¹⁴⁵ Others, however, wrote in saying that the *Advocate*'s coverage was too *anti*-religion. They took issue with a perceived lack of nuance when covering religious topics. As one person wrote, “The major problem with any gay attack on Christianity ... is that it simply ignores the fact that Christianity, like homosexuality itself, is not monolithic.”¹⁴⁶ Problematic here was the perceived tendency to equate a given religion's homophobic actions and beliefs with religion itself.¹⁴⁷ These critiques often bemoaned the in-fighting within the queer movement.¹⁴⁸ Yet what these letters seem to

¹⁴⁴ Timothy H. Taylor, “Selling the ‘Divine,’” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, April 5, 1978.

¹⁴⁵ Don Anderson, “Religious Threat,” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, December 27, 1979; Traylor Dunwoody, “Church or Crutch,” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, January 10, 1980; Bob Fussell, “Too Much Religion,” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, August 10, 1977.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Follett, “Religious Diversity,” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, March 6, 1980.

¹⁴⁷ Name Withheld, “Religious Response,” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, December 27, 1979.

¹⁴⁸ Name Withheld, “Shame,” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, January 10, 1980; Thomas Howell, “Need unity,” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, May 27, 1970; Name Withheld, “Divine Exception,” letter to the editor, *Advocate*, May 3, 1978.

emphasize above all was that religion itself was a topic on the minds of gay and lesbian individuals in the 1970s.

Within the pages of the *Advocate*, discussion of religion tended to reflect the dominant Judeo-Christian model of American religious pluralism. This model was popularized in the beginning in the 1920s; in the post-war period, as scholar J. Terry Todd says, “Moral appeals for nearly every civic concern ... were often cast in the name of a Judeo-Christian body politic.”¹⁴⁹ The Judeo-Christian model remained predominant through the 1970s and into the 1990s, when a multifaith model became favored.¹⁵⁰ Ecumenism—unity among Christian denominations—was also an important element of dominant discourses surrounding 20th-century religious pluralism.¹⁵¹ In the *Advocate*’s Q&A-style column “Smoke From Jeannie’s Lamp,” one reader wrote in to ask why gay people would want to be involved in religion when religion has been so oppressive. Jeannie’s response read, “You’re right ... however, we were still brought up according to the Judeo-Christian ethic.”¹⁵² Jeannie went on to explain that people can remove themselves from religion or reframe religion by attending an accepting congregation like MCC.¹⁵³ Though the *Advocate*’s coverage of religion and letters to the editor speak far more about Christianity than they do about Judaism, Jeannie’s usage of the framework of Judeo-Christian tradition reflected a wider attitude through which people conceived of religion. This attitude served, alongside the widespread dichotomized view of religion, to unite gay Jews and Christians, despite their religious differences, within a shared discursive landscape.

¹⁴⁹ J. Terry Todd, “The Temple of Religion and the Politics of Religious Pluralism: Judeo-Christian America at the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair,” in *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, ed. Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 202.

¹⁵⁰ Todd, 219.

¹⁵¹ Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, introduction to *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 16.

¹⁵² Jeanne Barney and Ed, “Smoke from Jeannie’s Lamp,” *Advocate*, June 18, 1975.

¹⁵³ Barney and Ed, “Smoke from Jeannie’s Lamp,” June 18, 1975.

A Discursive Space of Their Own

Jews, however, sought a space of their own. The development and popularity of *Gay Synagogue News* reflected the fact that what was impactful was not so much the possibility of being both gay and *religious*, but rather the lived experience of being both gay and *Jewish*. The discourse about religion, after all, was largely Christian-centric thanks both to MCC's dominance and the general hegemony of Christianity in the United States. Jews, of course, were crucially aware of their status as a minority and as a historically persecuted group, and this existing Jewish-American consciousness contributed to the development of a gay-Jewish consciousness that fed into gay Jews' desire to find specifically Jewish communities.

The sidelining of Judaism within the gay community also contributed to the growth of a gay-Jewish consciousness. In 1978, for instance, CBST wrote a letter to other gay-Jewish groups explaining that gay synagogues had recently been excluded from two catalogues, one Jewish and one gay. Barry Youngerman, CBST's liaison, wrote, "The Second Jewish Catalogue... includes a 'Jewish Yellow Pages' listing many hundreds of synagogues, but excluding, as far as I can see, all of our groups... The Gay Source, a chic gay catalogue recent[ly] published, includes a thorough section on gay religious movements, with one inexplicable omission – the Jews."¹⁵⁴ Youngerman suggested that gay-Jewish organizations write to each catalogue, seeking inclusion. Gay Jews faced exclusion not only within the Jewish community but also within the gay world, and addressing this reality strengthened the wider gay-Jewish community, thereby building a network.

In this same letter, Youngerman also shared with CBST's liaison groups a recently published article in the American Jewish Congress journal *Judaism*. He explained, "We feel this

¹⁵⁴ Barry Youngerman to Liaisons, January 29, 1978, Box 7, Folder 390, CBST Records.

peice [*sic*] is one of the most positive and perhaps most convincing articles about our situation to appear in any Jewish periodical. We have purchased 2,000 reprints, and are sending a copy to everyone on our mailing list, including all the gay-Jewish groups ... The piece can be very useful to us in answering questions and challenges, especially since it is written from a traditional religious perspective.”¹⁵⁵ CBST emphasized the need to recognize the particular challenges that Jewish tradition could pose in relation to homosexuality. By broadcasting a positive yet rigorous article to its entire mailing list, CBST demonstrated a feeling of responsibility to and oneness of all gay Jews.

The correspondence that CBST received further reflected the development of a specifically gay and Jewish consciousness. This consciousness was often connected to organizations that were fixed in a physical place. One example of a homosexual communication network in the 1950s was the *Ladder*, the publication of the lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis. Daughters of Bilitis, historian Martin Meeker writes, was the conduit and mediator of this network, which served as a “conceptual space where lesbians could go and be relatively assured that they would find the information and even the camaraderie for which they were looking, at least within the confines of the particular type of lesbian the DOB hoped to reach.”¹⁵⁶ The stability of such organizations as DOB, Meeker argues, is precisely what allowed these discursive networks to grow and function.¹⁵⁷

Despite CBST’s wandering over the course of the 1970s, the congregation remained a stable institution. Those writing to CBST knew that the congregation was always there, in New York, collecting letters from the P.O. Box advertised alongside services in newspapers.

Correspondents’ messages reflected CBST’s *New York* location: many indicated that they had

¹⁵⁵ Youngerman to Liaisons, January 29, 1978.

¹⁵⁶ Meeker, 89-90.

¹⁵⁷ Meeker, 89.

stopped by the synagogue or planned to stop by on trips to New York City. CBST, then, was linked to New York as a whole, a destination that welcomed gay people and Jews, as well as people who enjoyed visiting the city for any reason. Even some who did not indicate a personal connection to New York City mentioned CBST's location when inquiring about the congregation. FB, the man writing from Japan, said, "I should appreciate hearing news of your community there in New York also."¹⁵⁸ The synagogue as a congregation was therefore inextricably linked to the larger place in which it was situated, New York City, a place that itself loomed large in both the gay and lesbian and the Jewish imagination.

By writing to CBST, then, people linked two traditions that envisioned New York as a destination for gay people and for Jews. One correspondent, "JF," particularly emphasized this point. He wrote for help finding employment in New York because he was planning to move there from Israel. In Israel, he shared in his 1975 letter, he could not live freely as a gay man because of family pressure and societal prejudice. He explained, "Because you represent a Jewish gay organization in N.Y & because I'm also belonged [*sic*] to this religion & to that way of life, I hope you would listen to me & give me your best advise [*sic*]."¹⁵⁹ CBST became both a desired location and resource for JF because it brought together elements—gay, Jewish, and New York City—that enabled people like JF to feel whole and united with a greater community. JF also wrote to CBST because he believed that the synagogue had a network of contacts through which he could find employment. He even wrote, "I know there is a huge Jewish community in N.Y itself, & maybe it won't be that much difficult to get a proper position."¹⁶⁰ For JF, New York represented a place with an extensive Jewish and gay-Jewish network that he, as a gay Jew, could both rely on to get a job and join upon arrival to gain the freedom he did not have in Israel. For

¹⁵⁸ FB to CBST, June 28, 1975, Box 7, Folder 379, CBST Records.

¹⁵⁹ JF to CBST, July 30, 1975, Box 7, Folder 379, CBST Records.

¹⁶⁰ JF to CBST, July 30, 1975.

JF, New York appears to have represented a kind of promised land, and he imagined CBST to be his point of entry.

CBST was not a social service organization, particularly in 1975, when the synagogue was only two years old. So while it became an imagined destination, its on-the-ground reality could not fulfill the needs of all letter writers. The synagogue was best able to put people in touch with other gay-Jewish groups, situate people within a gay-Jewish network, answer inquiries about CBST as an organization, and forward newsletter issues—the latter was the synagogue’s response to any inquiry deemed too complicated to handle—but more specific requests or questions proved harder to carry out or answer. For example, a common request that CBST received was to find gay-Jewish pen pals for individuals, such as the one “SS” sent from Toronto to CBST in March of 1974. “Hello from Canada,” he began, before describing how he had been reading the *Village Voice*, where he learned about the congregation and “thought I might drop a few lines to the people who run the Services + Oneg Shabbats.”¹⁶¹ He reached out because he sought men ages 25 to 35 with whom he could correspond—he requested that his name, age, and contact information be posted so that “any of the guys who want a Jewish pen pal can write or phone me up some evening.”¹⁶² He provided a short description of himself—“I’m 31, am very conversant with Jewish + Hebrew culture, well traveled, hebrew speaking as well as others”—and stated that he would send a photo of himself to his prospective correspondent(s).¹⁶³ Yet connecting individuals proved to be challenging, and so the secretary in some cases simply told a correspondent that the synagogue did not have the capacity to connect pen pals. In 1977, the then-secretary, Michael Levine, indicated that he was forming a pen pal list that he would circulate to the community, but he could not say whether anyone would respond. Though CBST

¹⁶¹ SS to CBST, March 19, 1974, Box 7, Folder 378, CBST Records.

¹⁶² SS to CBST, March 19, 1974.

¹⁶³ SS to CBST, March 19, 1974.

could not meet this particular demand, correspondents' inquiries again reflected a conceptualization of CBST as a conduit for connection within the wider gay-Jewish world. Clearly, people wanted a gay-Jewish community even if they could not join a gay synagogue, and CBST, many believed, could facilitate people's ability to enter into such a community. Thus CBST signified more than a destination: people understood it to be an intermediary hub.

Several letters sent to CBST after the publication of a homophobic article in the *Jewish Press*, to which CBST wrote a letter to the editor in response, further emphasized this point. "SMF," a self-described "frum" (religious) woman, wrote to CBST from Michigan in 1977. She explained,

You see, I sometimes consider myself 'Gay'. Yet, I am not totally. When I saw your letter, I agreed with everything you said. Yet, Rabbi Klass's letter was also painful, to the 'nashma'.¹⁶⁴ It's a feeling one has. I have such a feeling now. I consider myself 'frum' and this makes things double as hard. I am divorced, mostly because of not getting along with my ex-husband, more + much more than the homosexuality involved. I've had several gay affairs and was totally fulfilled in all, except when it was over. I'm interested to hear your approach. Who conducts your services? Do only gays attain [*sic*]? Etc. etc.¹⁶⁵

SMF's letter stood out for being from a woman, and a "frum" woman at that. Women were a minority both at CBST and within CBST's virtual community. For SMF, it was an alternate communication network that allowed her to participate in CBST's discursive community. While it is difficult to know definitively that SMF had not previously heard of CBST, it is likely that the synagogue's exchange in the *Jewish Press* introduced her to the gay synagogue. Jewish communication networks, then, reached another subsection of gay and lesbian Jews who did not readily participate in gay communication networks. Yet because Jewish newspapers and

¹⁶⁴ Soul.

¹⁶⁵ SMF to CBST, 1977, Box 7, Folder 381, CBST Records.

community organizations were less likely to talk about CBST, these communication networks were slower.¹⁶⁶

While many people who wrote to CBST expressed a desire to visit that or another gay synagogue, for some, like SMF, writing a letter provided a necessary discretion that physically attending services did not provide; had she been located in New York City, SMF would probably not have attended services or events. “I am writing to you under a taken name,” SMF explained. “I wish, as of now, not to reveal my true identity. Probably because I’m so confused. Also, the address is of a friend’s.”¹⁶⁷ The limitations of a discursive space were also its advantages: the possibility for anonymity allowed more people to enter into a gay-Jewish consciousness.

Who are We?

It is telling that the number one request in letters was to be added to the mailing list or to be sent a sample copy of *Gay Synagogue News*. Even if people did not request the newsletter, CBST’s secretaries sent a copy in response to inquiries. When “FH” wrote to CBST in September of 1977, for instance, he explained that he wanted to establish a gay-Jewish group in Austin, Texas, and sought “some advice and encouragement.”¹⁶⁸ He wrote, “The distinctiveness of being Jewish is something we feel even stronger here in the land of Southern Baptists, and we find that our problems and values diverge from the non-Jewish gay community quite often.”¹⁶⁹ In response, Levine wrote, “I am enclosing various materials that might be of use to you. First is some information about us. Our brochure ‘Who Are We?’ will provide general background about the synagogue. Also, you will find the September and October newsletter which will tell you

¹⁶⁶ It must be noted, however, that various Jewish papers printed more positive representations of CBST and of homosexuality in the 1970s; the Jewish response was, like Judaism itself, not monolithic.

¹⁶⁷ SMF to CBST, 1977

¹⁶⁸ FH to CBST, September 15, 1977, Box 7, Folder 381, CBST Records.

¹⁶⁹ FH to CBST, September 15, 1977.

more about our activities.”¹⁷⁰ Levine also sent along materials about the last International Conference of Gay Jews and invited FH to the next conference.¹⁷¹ This exchange encapsulated the ways in which CBST’s communication network functioned. People were inspired to reach out to the congregation to receive information or advice specific to the experience of being both gay and Jewish. *Gay Synagogue* and the other literature CBST produced served as a way to provide updates to local congregants, but also, importantly, to showcase how a gay synagogue could function so that people like FH could potentially start groups of their own. In this respect *Gay Synagogue News* served not just to keep people “in the loop” but also to model what a gay synagogue could look and feel like.

The “Who are We?” brochure that Levine sent to FH addressed just that: it outlined the very basics of CBST’s mission and structure, spreading an understanding of what a gay synagogue *was*. Answering questions such as “How do we relate to the larger Jewish community?” and “What religious services and other activities do we offer?,” CBST painted a picture of a community that was foundationally diverse in terms of religious education and practice, profession, and age, and yet strongly bonded; that, like any other synagogue, observed Shabbat and Jewish holidays and held classes on Jewish subjects; whose congregants were “rightful members of the Jewish community” but whose observance was experimental; and that supported both Jewish and gay causes, marching under the banner of Beth Simchat Torah for each.¹⁷² The second question on the brochure— “Why form a gay synagogue?”—was particularly revealing in its aims: “A separate synagogue for gays probably offers as many reasons for being as there are people in attendance. Its greatest attraction is having the

¹⁷⁰ Levine to FH, October 9, 1977, Box 7, Folder 381, CBST Records

¹⁷¹ “Who are We?,” c. 1977, Box 7, Folder 376, CBST Records.

¹⁷² “Who are We?,” c. 1977.

opportunity to openly enjoy one's Jewishness and one's gayness."¹⁷³ The brochure then linked the idea of a gay synagogue to organizations that Jews historically created based on, say, their place of origin (such as the landsmanshaftn of turn-of-the-century New York City). "We formed our synagogue and community or kehillah because in it we can best experience our Jewishness among friends who understand our feelings and our way of life," the brochure concluded.¹⁷⁴ By outlining in basic terms exactly what CBST stood for and how the synagogue functioned, CBST directly responded to a demand for answers about what a gay synagogue—that novel concept—actually was. Thus, by sending this brochure to people who made inquiries via mail and by handing out this brochure at services, CBST literally popularized the very *concept* of a gay synagogue.

The reach and style of *Gay Synagogue News* similarly suggested that the newsletter created and cultivated a crucial discursive landscape that both united members of the physical congregation and served to connect a wider public. Physical space and community were obviously central to gay congregations in the 1970s, but CBST's newsletter extended far beyond CBST's in-person congregation. In 1976, a memo to the CBST Board of Trustees even outlined how the congregation's mailing list had "become excessive."¹⁷⁵ It listed the numbers of newsletter recipients: 160 members and 320 non-members received the mailings, as did 3 foreign members and 30 foreign non-members. 40 organizations were also on the mailing list. While it is difficult to say how many of these non-members attended services and thus participated in the in-person community, many were not local to New York, at least to judge by the geographic range of the letters that CBST received. So while CBST's physical space enabled people to find community, the newsletter made possible an intangible space for people who were searching for

¹⁷³ "Who are We?," c. 1977.

¹⁷⁴ "Who are We?," c. 1977.

¹⁷⁵ Daiboch, Memo, August 2, 1976.

gay-Jewish connection in a wider sense. Thus, with its newsletter, CBST promulgated a discursive landscape in which gay people throughout America and in different countries could read about and express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings about their gay-Jewish identities and beliefs. Together, CBST's physical space in New York City and its virtual space that extended beyond concrete boundaries and lived within the pages of newspapers, newsletters, and correspondences created a sense of kinship and collectivity.

Gay Synagogue News ⬡ ב"ה

august 1975 box 1270 g.p.o. new york 10001 av-elul 5735

MEMBERSHIP MEETING AUG. 6

The Board of Trustees has scheduled a general membership meeting for Wednesday, Aug. 6 at 8 PM, in our new premises at 151 Bank St.

The Board wants guidance on whether to air-condition our room. Cost inquiries are being made, and rough estimates will be presented to the members. This would be the largest one-item cash commitment yet undertaken, and your input would be appreciated. Other topics concerning the premises may also be raised.

Before the meeting begins, an informal dedication will be held, including the affixing of a mezusa. We are located on the second floor of the 'L' building at the Westbeth complex, between West and Washington Streets. First door to the right in the Bank Street courtyard -- through the rainbow door.

1st. SERVICE AUG. 8
AT
Our New Location
151 BANK ST.

ROSH HASHANA SEPT. 5,6,7

See page 3

TORAH READINGS	ONEG TOPICS
Re'eh.....Aug. 11:26-16:17 parsha: Deut. 11:26-16:17 haftora: Isaiah 54:11-55:5	1..Traits'chem b'Shalom-- Goodbye to 28th St. Farewell program, informal, nostalgic
Shofetim.....Aug. 16:18-21:9 parsha: Deut. 16:18-21:9 haftora: Isaiah 51:12-52:12	8..B'rochim ha'Baim-- Hello to Bank St.
Ki Thetze.....Aug. 21:10-25 parsha: Deut. 21:10-25 haftora: Isaiah 54:1-10	15..Ahad ha'Am birthday celebration
Ki Thavo.....Aug. 26-29:8 parsha: Deut. 26-29:8 haftora: Isaiah 55	22.. Kvutzot-- discussion groups
Nitzavim, Vayyelech.....Aug. 29:9-34 parsha: Deut. 29:9-34 haftora: Isaiah 56:10-58:9	29..Borscht Belt Humor

CONGREGATION BETH SIMCHAT TORAH

Figure 7. Front page of *Gay Synagogue News*, August 1975 (photo courtesy of CBST Records).

Gay Synagogue News regularly published pieces about upcoming events, community updates on topics such as finding a permanent building for the congregation or board meetings,

reflections on recent events, summaries and interpretations of Torah readings or holidays, fundraising appeals, and social justice issues. Over the years, it also published letters that the congregation received; copies of sermons delivered at services; and memorial notes for congregants who had died. CBST also began sharing news about other gay synagogues. In May 1975, for instance, the *Gay Synagogue News* published notes about a group in Montreal and Congregation Etz Chaim in Miami, providing contact information for both. The newsletter wrote specific information about the Miami synagogue, such as, “Congregation Etz Chaim has been meeting weekly in various places in and around Miami for quite a few months ... Etz Chaim welcomes inquiries, especially from those planning to visit Miami.”¹⁷⁶ There was, it seems, a telling juxtaposition between the impermanence communicated in the description of Etz Chaim, which kept moving around to “various places,” and the apparent rootedness of a mention in CBST’s newsletter.

As CBST itself became more “rooted,” so, too, did this column, called “News from All Over,” which grew to include updates about congregations from Australia to Des Moines that arose after CBST in the 1970s. Some of these updates shared addresses and contact information: the column revealed in 1978, for instance, that MCT-Mishpocheh, Washington’s gay and lesbian synagogue, left its prior location and had yet to identify a new one. CBST printed a phone number for readers to call to locate MCT-Mishpocheh’s services. Other material simply shared what was happening in different congregations—Chicago’s Congregation Or Chadash had a Conservative service for the first time, while Philadelphia’s Congregation Beth Ahavah had donated money from its Purim dance to charities serving the Jewish and gay communities.¹⁷⁷ CBST’s “News from All Over” column seems to have acted simultaneously as a Jewish-Gay

¹⁷⁶ “Down South,” *Gay Synagogue News*, May 1975, Box 1, Folder 80, CBST Records.

¹⁷⁷ “News from All Over,” *Gay Synagogue News*, June 1978, Box 1, Folder 116, CBST Records.

Yellowpages, a bulletin for the latest programming updates, and a place to applaud and communicate with other congregations.

Indeed, in January of 1978, *Gay Synagogue News* published the following: “From deep in the heart of Texas, the latest addition to the roster of gay-Jewish groups has contacted CBST. Gay Jews of Texas, or GyJeT (pronounced “Gidget”) has been meeting weekly in Austin, the state capital, since early November... Those wishing to contact GyJeT should inquire at the shul office.”¹⁷⁸ The man who had inquired about how to start a gay-Jewish group in Austin had done just that.

The 1970s marked a high point in CBST’s correspondence with individuals, as well as in the focus on religion in gay newspapers such as the *Advocate*. As the 1980s approached, reporters dedicated less attention to topics of religion, and gay religious organizations, already popular, advertised less frequently than before in the *Advocate*. CBST continued to spread word about different gay synagogues in *Gay Synagogue News*, but by the 1980s, the gay-Jewish consciousness that was emerging throughout the 1970s was more entrenched; fewer people reached out to CBST to understand how the synagogue worked or for advice on founding their own groups. A gay-Jewish discursive space had developed and come into its own at a time when it was needed for gay Jews to actively connect and claim their space.

¹⁷⁸ “Now Texas,” *Gay Synagogue News*, January 1978, Box 1, Folder 111, CBST Records.

Chapter Three: Memory of Space, Space of Memory

In December of 1973, the *New York Times* published an article about CBST, describing the congregation's folding chairs, bright Sabbath candles, and origins. The article stated, "The leaders of Temple Beth Simchat Torah... can remember when the group began 10 months ago with only a dozen homosexuals in attendance at the center near 28th street."¹⁷⁹ They could remember 10 months ago? It would be worrisome if they could not—but that was not the point. What *was* the point was that 10 months ago CBST had a dozen congregants; now 99 people attended Shabbat services.¹⁸⁰ By framing CBST's origin as a memory even less than a year after its founding, the congregation not only communicated growth and comparative stability rather than indeterminacy and vulnerability, but it also gave the congregation a shared history. And, indeed, other parts of the article could be interpreted to represent as much: there was, for instance, reference to the "mimeographed 'prayer book,'" or the statement that CBST was "in a cocoon stage."¹⁸¹ Or even the fact that interviewed congregants requested that they be referred to only by their first names or pseudonyms, fearing professional reprisal for their association with a gay organization. For CBST, memory and congregational history almost immediately became a stable conceptual "space."

The idea that memory can serve as a unifying space is not new. In "Memoryscapes of Liberation: Activist Mnemonic Labour in the Queer Press," Daniele Salerno explores the idea of activist "memoryscapes," which are, in their most simple definition, "adaptable schematic forms that social and activist groups invest with meanings and narratives, in a way that is specific to

¹⁷⁹ Marcia Chambers, "A Homosexual Temple Holds Rites on West Side," *New York Times*, December 23, 1973, https://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/23/archives/a-homosexual-temple-holds-rites-on-west-side-petition-for.html?ugr p=u&unlocked_article_code=1.hU0.4XwA.edR8xjP7No8I&smid=url-share.

¹⁸⁰ Chambers, "A Homosexual Temple."

¹⁸¹ "David," quoted in Chambers, "A Homosexual Temple."

local contexts, political sensitivities and social and historical background.”¹⁸² Salerno identifies memoryscapes as multitemporal, perspectival, multiscalar, and relational. By this he means that memoryscapes link past, present, and future; that they shift according to the context in which they are interpreted; that they exist on various levels and among networks big and small; and that they constitute “a shared space for collective meaning-making and discourse production.”¹⁸³ Within the context of queer liberation, memoryscapes “serve as arenas for mediation and comparison, linking distinct histories from diverse social groups and revealing their shared threads.”¹⁸⁴ Indeed, Salerno explains that “viewing shared oppressed nature as a ‘deep’ narrative similarity” offered a particularly salient way to unite people via memoryscapes.¹⁸⁵ Within the context of CBST’s early history, we may apply the concept of memoryscapes in order to better understand the ways in which CBST constructed a congregational memory in a way that was informed by both Jewish and gay frameworks of memory and that produced, as Salerno puts it, “collective meaning-making.”

Building a History

The historical narrative of CBST’s first makeshift services was established in the 1970s both by the congregation itself, which marked every anniversary with a party, play, or oneg, and by the press. Indeed, the press presented congregations according to certain narrative arcs, which then influenced how people understood them. For instance, when reporter Randy Shilts wrote about CBST for the *Advocate* in 1975, he stated, “On a cold February evening in New York two years ago, a Bombay immigrant¹⁸⁶ armed with a shopping bag of religious books awaited

¹⁸² Daniele Salerno, “Memoryscapes of Liberation: Activist Mnemonic Labour in the Queer Press,” *Cultural Studies* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2023.2274077>, 8.

¹⁸³ Salerno, 7-8.

¹⁸⁴ Salerno, abstract.

¹⁸⁵ Salerno, 13.

¹⁸⁶ Many articles emphasized the Indian identity of CBST’s founder, often in a way that seemed to exoticize him.

responses to an ad he placed in a local newspaper.”¹⁸⁷ With this introduction to CBST, Shilts seems to have analyzed the synagogue through a framework of an against-the-odds rise. He emphasized the “cold” night of CBST’s foundation, the shopping bag with necessary ritual objects, and how the founder “awaited responses,” communicating a sense of uncertainty and even perhaps isolation. This reporting reflected conversations Shilts had had with members of CBST, indicating that this founding narrative was claimed and promoted by the congregation itself. While it is difficult to untangle what CBST congregants said about the founding from Shilts’ own interpretation of the events that unfolded, the publication of the narrative advanced this particular story further, reinforcing and reproducing it. This is not to say that CBST’s founding was *not* marked by uncertainty and perhaps isolation; as I made clear in Chapter One, these were real elements of the synagogue’s early years and undoubtedly influenced the congregation. What is noteworthy, however, is the active *claiming* of an against-the-odds discourse by congregants and outsiders alike, which aligned CBST with the larger gay liberation movement.

We can understand Shilts’ description of CBST’s origins as an example of how a narrative linked to and claimed by gay and lesbian communities was applied in order to form a new narrative, which then served to unite the congregation—and also, perhaps, a wider public by making the new group more “legible” by situating it within existing frameworks. Indeed, this discourse was not exclusive to the gay press. In 1977, reporter Grace Lichtenstein published an article in the *New York Times* entitled “Homosexual Residents of New York City Are Finding a New Pride,” which began by describing CBST’s Yom Kippur services. Lichtenstein reported that the Yom Kippur services were overflowing, with hundreds of people present. She later stated, “Four years ago, the synagogue consisted of a small band of homosexuals who gathered at

¹⁸⁷ Randy Shilts, “Gay, Jewish and Proud,” *Advocate*, September 10, 1975.

irregular intervals for services. Now, it is a part of New York life, involved in United Jewish Appeal fund-raising efforts, tree-plantings in Israel and offering classes in Hebrew. It is one of the many symbols of what some homosexual New Yorkers call ‘the new gay pride.’”¹⁸⁸ CBST’s rapid growth was by now an established fact; however, the description of the “small band of homosexuals” and “irregular intervals” communicated a sense of tenuousness and uncertainty. Yet CBST’s early advertisements in the *Village Voice* challenged the idea that the congregation ever met irregularly; by March 1, 1973, just three weeks after the congregation’s initial gathering, the congregation was advertising “services and oneg Shabbat every Friday 8 P.M.”¹⁸⁹ Thus, what this article communicated just as much—and perhaps more—than CBST’s actual history was the way in which CBST’s history was imaginatively (re-)understood in 1977 because of the tropes assigned to the congregation. Lichtenstein’s account of CBST’s history also aligned with the “coming out” narrative that the gay liberation movement popularized. In order to mark CBST’s growth, Lichtenstein described how the synagogue was “a part of New York life.”¹⁹⁰ This perspective aligned with the rest of the article’s message: Lichtenstein directly described how homosexuals in New York “only a few years ago began to ‘come out of the closet’ and into the street” and more recently became “a cohesive, open and organized force.”¹⁹¹ Though this article was aimed at a readership that extended well beyond the gay and lesbian community—this was the *New York Times*, after all—Lichtenstein’s analysis reflected how gay liberation rhetoric had become widespread not only among gay and lesbian people but also

¹⁸⁸ Grace Lichtenstein, “Homosexuals in New York Find New Pride,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1977, https://www.nytimes.com/1977/10/25/archives/new-jersey-pages-homosexuals-in-new-york-find-new-pride-gains-are.html?ugrp=u&unlocked_article_code=1.hU0.ICLB.WSszSyCyeN34a&smid=url-share.

¹⁸⁹ Advertisement for Gay Synagogue, *Village Voice*, March 1, 1973, <https://books.google.com/books?id=49NHAAAAIBAJ&lpg=PA79&dq=gay%20synagogue%20village%20voice&pg=PA79#v=onepage&q=gay%20synagogue%20village%20voice&f=false>.

¹⁹⁰ Lichtenstein, “Homosexuals in New York Find New Pride,” October 25, 1977.

¹⁹¹ Lichtenstein, “Homosexuals in New York Find New Pride,” October 25, 1977.

among the wider public—a dynamic development which then contributed to the reproduction of narrative schemata such as the coming-out arc.



Figure 8. Challah, candlesticks, and a kiddush cup on a Friday night in the classroom (note the finger painting on the wall) in the Church of the Holy Apostles, 1975 (photo courtesy of the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network).

CBST itself promoted a particular narrative of its origins. On the congregation's tenth anniversary in 1983, the congregation published in a commemorative anniversary journal a history of CBST entitled "Our Heritage as Gay Jews: the Story of Congregation." It started, "We began in a shopping bag. Macy's, Bloomingdale's or D'Agostino--no one remembers now. What we do remember is that the bag contained a Kiddush cup, some candles and a challah. That was our Synagogue."¹⁹² With this opening, CBST immediately emphasized a sense of improvisation

¹⁹² "Our Heritage as Gay Jews: The story of Beth Simchat Torah," 1983, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, Organization Files from the Lesbian Herstory Archive, Gale Primary Sources,

and urgency, offering the idea that CBST literally began in a shopping bag. By setting up the history in this way, CBST set the groundwork for a narrative of linear growth and progress. Indeed, describing CBST's first meeting, the story reported that "what was barely a minyan began meeting in the community room of a Chelsea church," and that "news of the fledgling little Synagogue was spread through word-of-mouth and via tiny ads in *The Village Voice*."¹⁹³ The story described the initial turnout in terms of the Jewish minyan, the 10-person quorum traditionally necessary for collective worship. In doing so, it communicated that the synagogue had *just barely* come together. While this was perhaps simply a fact, the other adjectives included in the origin story seem to convey a level of interpretation, too. Describing CBST as "fledgling" and "little" and the *Village Voice* ads as "tiny" firmly presented CBST's growth as an impressive feat after an uphill battle. The repeated emphasis on borrowing, salvaging, and improvising ritual objects further communicated this. The rest of the history, however, described CBST independently acquiring ritual objects and space; rapidly expanding; and becoming more of a complex, established institution.¹⁹⁴ In so describing the congregation's origins, CBST communicated a full narrative arc that conveyed a sense of *just how far* the congregation had come. The synagogue and wider community drew on a framework of the extraordinary and unexpected in order to construct a history of CBST's own.

Commemorative Practices: 1970s and Beyond

The way in which CBST engaged with the theme of wandering was an example of a memoryscape: uniting Jewish and queer histories under a shared narrative assigned new meaning

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FCXWPC857222090/AHSI?u=columbiau&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=15e7af5d&pg=4>

¹⁹³ "Our Heritage as Gay Jews," 1983.

¹⁹⁴ "Our Heritage as Gay Jews," 1983.

to the congregation's negotiation of physical space and prompted a feeling of unity in the congregation. Engagement with memoryscapes occurred within other contexts, too. By viewing gay-Jewish experiences through the lens of traditional Jewish narratives, CBST symbolically brought together Jewish and gay identities via a carefully managed narrative alignment. For instance, in the December 1978 issue of *Gay Synagogue News*, an article about Chanukah stated, "Our ancestors refused to assimilate, to give up their uniqueness, their right to be different from the majority. And as they celebrated their re-dedication with light, God joined their celebration and multiplied their light eight-fold."¹⁹⁵ By emphasizing themes of anti-assimilation, individuality, diversity, and minority culture, CBST created a queer reading of the Chanukah story, one that also reflected the rhetoric of the gay liberation movement and that of Jewish American history. Indeed, "our ancestors" could be interpreted as those in the Chanukah story, but they could also be congregants' more recent Jewish and gay forebears.

Passover also became particularly meaningful for gay Jews: in the March-April 1983 issue of *Gay Synagogue News*, the newsletter stated, "Passover, the time of liberation, has always held a special meaning in the life of every Jew... We are not only reminded of what has happened to our people, but this festival gives us the opportunity to reflect on the present day enslavements we face--our own as well as those thrust upon us--being gay and lesbian Jews."¹⁹⁶ By identifying in the Passover story the themes that defined the struggle for gay liberation, CBST's congregants effectively claimed biblical history for their gay selves as well as for their Jewish selves. Memoryscapes allowed gay congregations to integrate their gay and Jewish identities symbolically, which then promoted a sense of collectivity on the congregational level.

¹⁹⁵ "Lights," *Gay Synagogue News*, December 1978, Box 4, Folder 122, CBST Records.

¹⁹⁶ "Passover," *Gay Synagogue News*, March-April 1983, Box 4, Folder 167, CBST Records.

Establishing a shared history and memory of the congregation's growth encouraged this feeling of unity. So, too, did practices that commemorated events in the past. Two annual events in particular, Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) and Pride, offered the congregation opportunities to commemorate the past and link it to the present. In April 1976, for instance, CBST held its first Holocaust Memorial Service. In doing this, CBST aligned itself with the wider Jewish world, which, as *Gay Synagogue News* reported, was paying more attention to the Holocaust. The newsletter said, "We hope it can be instituted as an annual memorial at BST, as it is being done at an increasing number of synagogues."¹⁹⁷ The event included a short service, Yiddish music and poetry, a historical slideshow, and two brief talks about the Holocaust. "All those assembled lit Yahrzeit candles, and joined in a community Kaddish," the newsletter stated. "We felt a renewed reverence for our martyred brothers and sisters, and an appreciation of our own good fortune to be alive and free to carry on the work of rebuilding the Jewish people."¹⁹⁸ In the congregation's commemoration of the Holocaust, CBST aligned itself with the larger turn towards the memory of the Holocaust among American Jews in the 1970s.

CBST also commemorated the anniversary of Stonewall each year, conducting a Pride Shabbat and participating in the Christopher Street Liberation Day march. Gay congregations also drew on gay liberation discourses such as the coming-out narrative in the context of Jewish prayer. For instance, a responsive prayer for Pride from CBST's 1979 commemorations went as follows:

[Congregation:] Remember, God of compassion, our brothers and sisters who have died because they were gay. Remember too, our sisters and brothers who cannot be with us at this celebration, those who remain alone in the dark.

[Leader:] We cry with them, remembering the little deaths we suffer daily, when we, too, deny our Gay identities. Adonai, we pray that those who sit in darkness

¹⁹⁷ "Holocaust Memorial," *Gay Synagogue News*, June 1976, Box 4, Folder

¹⁹⁸ "Holocaust Memorial," June 1976.

may soon join us in the light of pride and joy in each of our unique identities.
Hasten the day when our liberation will be complete!¹⁹⁹

In this prayer, which also reflects the liturgical flexibility of gay and lesbian synagogues, those who were not openly celebrating Pride were characterized as “alone in the dark.” The prayer, framing the coming-out process with religiously intoned rhetoric, characterized the act of openly recognizing gay identity as a journey from darkness to light and as a means of liberation. This interpretation, like the larger gay liberation movement in the 1970s, emphasized the importance of coming out and being open: this prayer reinforced that narrative, assigning religious significance to it. The memoryscape of liberation allowed for this synthesis of gay and Jewish tradition.²⁰⁰ The prayer also focused heavily on remembrance. Remembrance is a core Jewish value—indeed, it is a commandment—and so the rhetoric of commemoration was not foreign in synagogues in the 1970s.²⁰¹ However, this prayer extended the ritual narrative of commemoration to “our brothers and sisters who have died because they were gay.”²⁰² In doing so, CBST forged a collective awareness of a gay past, one that accompanied an existing awareness of a Jewish past.

Congregations not only united internally via a memoryscape; memoryscapes also linked different gay religious groups, inspiring interfaith collaboration. In June of 1973, an arsonist set fire to a New Orleans gay bar, the Up Stairs Lounge. 32 people were killed, including the minister and numerous members of the New Orleans MCC, which met at the bar. After the attack, religious groups united for memorial services in cities across the country, including in New York. The *Advocate* reported, “The evening service of New York Metropolitan Community Church was given over to an ecumenical service. The Rev. Roy Birchard, MCC pastor; the Rev.

¹⁹⁹ Pride Prayer, June 22, 1979, Box 8, Folder 446, CBST Records.

²⁰⁰ White, *Reforming Sodom*, 167.

²⁰¹ Sabrina Costa Braga, “Historiography and Collective Memory: a discussion on Yerushalmi’s Zakhōr and its interpretations,” *Historia da Historiografia* 16, no. 41 (2023), <http://dx.doi.org/10.15848/hh.v16i41.1982>.

²⁰² Pride Prayer, June 22, 1979.

Howard Wells, assistant MCC pastor; the Rev. Robert Carter of Dignity; and Fr. Clement [of the Church of the Beloved Disciple] conducted the memorial service. A member of the Gay Synagogue in New York delivered a prayer at the service.”²⁰³ In the conceptual space of memory, different gay religious groups found common ground.

This impulse for gay religious organizations to come together in commemoration of lost lives persisted into the 1980s and beyond. The Lesbian & Gay Inter-Religious Coalition of New York was founded in 1980 with collaboration between CBST and churches across the Christian spectrum. That same year, the group held its first annual Celebration of Life, an interfaith service, to begin Pride celebrations.²⁰⁴ After the 1980 Ramrod shooting, when a gunman entered a Greenwich Village gay bar and killed two people, the Inter-Religious Coalition hosted “A Celebration for Solemn Remembrance and Affirmation.”²⁰⁵ In November of 1982, the Inter-Religious Coalition held an event called “A Day of Remembrance for Lesbian and Gay Holocaust Victims and Other Lesbian and Gay Martyrs,” which included a ritual of remembrance and a specially commissioned musical piece.²⁰⁶ These events united gay churches and synagogues in religious commemoration of events that affected the gay and lesbian community. The memoryscape of martyrdom and loss symbolically united different gay religious groups. Indeed, the fact that by the 1980s, CBST, alongside other groups, not only religiously commemorated the Holocaust and gay “martyrs” but also did so *together*, recognizing the gay individuals who died during the Holocaust, demonstrates the increasing salience of uniting in commemoration in the 1980s.

²⁰³ Martin St. John, ““A part of our souls was ignited...,”” *Advocate*, August 1, 1973.

²⁰⁴ *Justice Justice You Shall Pursue: A Celebration of Justice for the Lesbian and Gay Community*, June 21, 1981, Box 25, “Religion - The Inter-Religious Celebration Committee,” International Gay Information Center Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (hereafter IGIC).

²⁰⁵ *A Celebration of Solemn Remembrance and Affirmation*, November 21, 1981, Box 25, “Religion - Methodist - Washington Square Church,” IGIC.

²⁰⁶ “Mark Your Calendar,” *Gay Synagogue News*, October 1982, Box 4, Folder 163, CBST Records.

By the time the AIDS crisis began in the early 1980s, gay and lesbian synagogues and churches had long engaged in practices of collective commemoration that linked gay and religious identities. In 1983, the Inter-Religious Coalition's Celebration of Life remained a Pride event, but it also served as a memorial to those who had died from AIDS, which had, by 1983, become a serious problem in the wider world and within gay congregations, whose members were profoundly impacted.²⁰⁷ Making the Celebration of Life a memorial service for people who had died from AIDS required no significant shift in the tone of the liturgy; the Celebration of Life, a Pride event and therefore a commemoration of the Stonewall riots, and other Inter-Religious Coalition events, had long emphasized liberation, memory, and God's oneness. These religious institutions had already collectively engaged with each other through the memoryscapes that would allow for the inclusion of the topics of AIDS and the commemoration of those who died from AIDS within ritual.

Within CBST, the topic of AIDS was similarly mapped onto familiar frameworks of commemoration. The November 1984 issue of *Gay Synagogue News* published an excerpt of a sermon from Yom Kippur services. Congregant David Krause offered this speech during the Yizkor portion of Yom Kippur, which focuses on remembrance. After reflecting on the responsibility to remember tradition, people, and actions, Krause said,

And we remember those Jews, Gays, Lesbians, and others who died without anyone to carry on their memory. We may not know them by name, but we know of them and they touch our lives. Some were slain in the Holocaust, in the Crusades, in the all-too-numerous senseless slaughters that we have endured. Some were caught in the loneliness, despair and panic that leads to suicide. Some were cut down in plagues and in wars. We remember.

And a special memory. We remember those who have died of AIDS. There are already those who are trying to make us forget, to make it appear that this modern plague is ending. It is not. More are affected each day.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Cohen, 62-63.

²⁰⁸ David Krause, "Torah Ta'am," *Gay Synagogue News*, November 1984, Box 4, Folder 182, CBST Records.

As I have outlined in this chapter, gay synagogues, and gay congregations at large, interpreted gay culture and religious tradition together, uniting under memoryscapes that allowed communities to forge new gay-Jewish narratives and histories that served to unite the congregational communities. Krause's sermon reflected this linking of narratives and histories by emphasizing the responsibility of the congregation to ritually remember both Jewish and queer ancestors. Like the 1983 Celebration of Life, this sermon demonstrated how CBST and other gay congregations had, since their inception, established a groundwork of queer, religious remembrance; collective commemoration was foundational to their existence and a crucial facilitator of community cohesion. When AIDS began to affect CBST's community, the ways in which CBST already drew upon memoryscapes offered a model for how the congregation would commemorate those who died during the epidemic.

In 1981, CBST started a Premises Trust Fund to set aside money for the community to eventually acquire a permanent residence.²⁰⁹ In 2011—30 years later—CBST did just that, and on April 3, 2016, the congregation dedicated its self-proclaimed “home of our own.”²¹⁰ On that day, CBST marched as a congregation a mile and a half from Bethune Street to 30th Street between 6th and 7th Avenues, where the congregation had purchased and renovated a permanent space. Congregants passed five Torah scrolls amongst themselves, carrying them all the way under a Rainbow chuppah as the congregation's choir sang. At the dedication ceremony, CBST's rabbi, Sharon Kleinbaum, stated, “Indeed, what will make this home open is when these Torahs, moved from 30th Street, past the Church of the Holy Apostles, coming here, are placed in the

²⁰⁹ Cohen, 297.

²¹⁰ Cohen, 296, 299.

ark.”²¹¹ After the thick rainbow ribbon was cut and the mezuzah was affixed to the door, the choir led the community in the Shehechyanu, a celebratory blessing, as community leaders carried the Torahs inside, walking them through the new premises and towards the ark in the sanctuary, where they carefully installed the scrolls.

The placing of the Torahs in the ark constituted the opening of CBST’s new home, but Kleinbaum’s mention of the Church of the Holy Apostles, mere blocks away from CBST’s new premises, recalled the places from where CBST came. Indeed, the congregation had been founded in the church, and Shabbat services had returned to the Holy Apostles sanctuary back in the 1990s, when CBST’s premises could no longer fit the number of people who wished to attend Friday night services. CBST’s ability to purchase a permanent space reflected forty years of growth.

At CBST’s dedication ceremony, the past was continually referenced. CBST Board President Nathan Goldstein stated in his speech, “We started as a group of gay men with nothing more than a shopping cart full of kippot and makeshift prayer books, and then we became the wandering Jews.”²¹² By highlighting both CBST’s initial lack of resources and the congregation’s consequent “wandering,” Goldstein linked its history of having no permanent accommodation to the congregation’s need always to improvise, to use its initiative, and to survive. This emphasis was not new: in February of 2003, reflecting on the occasion of CBST’s 30th anniversary, Joshua Bilmes published a retrospective about the congregation. He wrote that CBST’s founding “lives not in the written record but in the stories that have been handed down across the generations of our community, of an ad in the Village Voice, and of the ritual objects conveyed to The Church

²¹¹ Sharon Kleinbaum, “CBST New Home Dedication Ceremony April 3 2016,” April 3, 2016, video, 1:27:33, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IxCJt4RNI&list=PLZAPDgTAarM_WdOX-dVTgOWhHlBLR4LE&index=2.

²¹² Nathan Goldstein, “CBST New Home Dedication Ceremony,” April 3, 2016.

of the Holy Apostles in a shopping bag.”²¹³ He continued, noting that the archives of *Gay Synagogue News* demonstrated that CBST in its early days was both similar to and different from CBST in 2003:

Those who attended our congregational meeting in November, held in order to vote on the renewal of our current lease at Holy Apostles, are following in a tradition that dates back some 28 years. It was in January 1975 that our membership was first told that we had outgrown our home and held a congregational meeting to plan what was to come. By the summer of 1975 the synagogue was on the move to 151 Bank St. in the Westbeth complex. But a year later, we had to vacate that sublet, and Westbeth was willing to offer us a five-year lease for 7,000 square feet in the same Westbeth location we occupy today.²¹⁴

That Bilmes dedicated half of his retrospective to the topic of CBST’s housing woes reflected the continued salience of the theme of space for CBST’s community. By 2003, CBST’s premises represented continuity for the community—the congregation’s five-year lease at Westbeth, which began in 1977, turned into a decades-long lease—but the “tradition” of negotiating space offered its own form of continuity as well. CBST’s early locations and the work it took to establish them had physically and symbolically united the community in the 1970s. And as time passed, this negotiation of space became a particularly potent memory for the congregation—a form of remembrance that also generated a sense of community and unity.

²¹³ Joshua Bilmes, “30th Anniversary Retrospective,” *Gay Synagogue News*, February 2003, Lesbian Herstory Archives Collection, Gale Primary Sources, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/ICVURV274656324/AHSI?u=columbiau&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=8f5ecb51>.

²¹⁴ Bilmes, “30th Anniversary Retrospective.”

Conclusion

When *Advocate* reporter Arnie Kantrowitz visited CBST in 1975, it was Purim.

Kantrowitz entered the Church of the Holy Apostles, where, he noted, he had attended Gay Activist Alliance meetings years before. He described his amazement at the scene: “There were nearly two hundred people there, celebrating Judaism and its heritage as only gay people can.... I was watching the nearly forgotten celebrations of my childhood resurrected, and they stirred me to the quick.... The services were the singiest, dancingest, most technicolor Jewish service I had ever beheld.”²¹⁵ Like many others, Kantrowitz had felt distanced from his Jewish upbringing when he became active in gay liberation. “I didn’t see Judaism as my heritage so much as my oppressor,” he explained. After Kantrowitz attended CBST’s Purim service, he was stopped on the street by a Jewish man who asked, “Are you a Jew?”²¹⁶ Kantrowitz answered that he was—and that he was gay. And that he did not wish to participate in whatever the inquirer sought him out for: “I hope it doesn’t offend you, but I have my own place to go now, if I want to.”²¹⁷ This anecdote emphasized the potency of CBST’s work for many gay Jews in the 1970s, particularly gay-Jewish men. Kantrowitz cited CBST as “my own place to go now, if I wish.”²¹⁸ The option was open; the place existed. And it was *his own*.

This thesis has aimed to show that, as CBST negotiated space and place in the 1970s, so, too, did space and place create CBST. Not only did the collective improvisation of a physical space suitable to Jewish ritual unite the burgeoning community. By assigning Jewish and gay symbolic meaning *to* this process of improvisation and to the search for long-term premises, the theme of space, which linked together Jewish and gay history and experience, became a way for

²¹⁵ Kantrowitz, ““I Am a Part of My People,” June 4, 1975.

²¹⁶ Kantrowitz, ““I Am a Part of My People,” June 4, 1975.

²¹⁷ Kantrowitz, ““I Am a Part of My People,” June 4, 1975.

²¹⁸ Kantrowitz, ““I Am a Part of My People,” June 4, 1975.

CBST to strengthen and unite its community—in effect, to create a distinctive gay Judaism. The intense focus on finding a home of its own reflected the extent of the meaning that the community derived from being “in the desert,” so to speak.

What this also emphasized, however, was that in order to adequately analyze what space and place meant for a community like CBST, an expansive understanding of these topics was necessary—one that would account for the religious and symbolic significance of these themes. Indeed, the fact that CBST’s community extended far beyond the physical boundaries of its space warranted a consideration of discursive space. It was through this discursive space—through the press and correspondence with people around the globe—that CBST helped to spread a gay-Jewish consciousness across the country and the world. And central to that gay-Jewish consciousness was memory. CBST drew upon particular narrative structures in order to create both a congregational and a more expansive actual and imagined gay-Jewish history that became rooted in the conceptual space of memory.

It is no coincidence that CBST emerged during the 1970s, a decade that saw the spread of a new gay consciousness as well as a resurgent Jewish-American consciousness, both of which emphasized visibility, liberation, and the literal taking up of space. The liberating ethos of social movements in the 1970s not only encouraged the growth of individual movements but also allowed for the merging of them. For gay-Jewish groups, a focus on liberation meant that it was easier, not harder, to develop a gay religious consciousness, since liberation has always been such a potent theme in the Jewish religious tradition. This was made manifest by the ways in which gay Jews continually searched for, and negotiated space for, the synagogue: the theme of “a space of one’s own” encapsulated, for both Jews and gay people, the significance of liberation. The 1970s was also a time of increased public connectivity for and between the gay

and lesbian community. Newspapers such as the *Advocate* had emerged forcefully in the 1960s and played a role in spreading gay-religious consciousness. At this time, non-gay newspapers such as the *Village Voice* and even the *New York Times* would accept advertisements for a gay synagogue and even publish articles on the subject, which made it easier for gay religious groups to form.

Viewing the 1970s through the lenses of place and space highlights the ways in which Jewish and gay identities could come together under one roof, so to speak, and create via lived and imagined experience a fundamental and meaningful origin story and gay-Jewish history that sustained gay Jews at CBST and far beyond. Within the literal and conceptualized space of CBST, gay and Jewish identities were not only not mutually exclusive; they were also mutually constituted in very powerful ways. Indeed, many congregants at CBST felt a strengthening of both their Jewish and gay identities as they participated in the Gay Synagogue. I do not mean to suggest that before CBST and other gay synagogues emerged, no one was both openly gay and a practicing Jew (other manifestations of gay-Jewish identity in the 1970s, which I do not doubt existed, demand further research). The institutionalization of gay Judaism, however, represented a claiming of space that was empowering for many gay Jews. The fact that CBST claimed space as gay Jews in Pride marches and as gay Jews (even if only the congregation knew it) at marches for Soviet Jewry testified to this self-representation amongst others in the “real” world.

When CBST purchased its own building, the congregation had the opportunity to renovate it and make it *entirely* its own. Part of this process involved literally building memory into the walls. In the sanctuary, CBST inscribed on a wall the names of community members who had died (such a wall is not atypical in synagogues), alongside two plaques, one dedicated to the memory of those who died of AIDS and one in memory of those who died during the

Holocaust. A bathroom's walls are covered with photos, articles from the *Gay Synagogue News* and outside newspapers, and other ephemera from the congregation's past. CBST's AIDS quilt hangs on another wall.²¹⁹ In CBST's permanent home, memory, history, and space are integrated and literally become one.



Figure 9. The walls of CBST's bathroom showcase the congregation's history (photo courtesy of New York Magazine).

CBST now truly has a home of its own: so where to go from here? As it turns out, CBST is not *quite* done wandering. Last September, I tuned into CBST's Kol Nidre services in a very 2023 way: by clicking on an emailed link that directed me to a live stream, where I was able to follow along at home. Virtually, I joined around 4000 people who gathered in-person at the Jacob Javits Center, where CBST's Kol Nidre services have been held since the 1990s (with the exception of the peak COVID years, when services were moved online).²²⁰ CBST's High Holy

²¹⁹ See "Congregation Beit Simchat Torah," Architecture Research Office, 2016, <https://www.aro.net/congregation-beit-simchat-torah/#:~:text=Within%20a%20landmark%20Cass%20Gilbert,all%20with%20warmth%20and%20openness.>

²²⁰ Cohen, 171-73.

Day services are free for anyone to attend, in-person or virtually. This is extremely atypical for a synagogue, but ever since CBST's High Holy Day services in 1975, the congregation has maintained an "Open Door" policy.²²¹

CBST relocates for the High Holy Days and other services that draw many attendees in order to make services accessible to as many people as wish to attend (they emphasize that you do not have to identify as LGBTQ+, either). Last year, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum gave a wave to the live stream cameras during Yom Kippur services. The wave was directed at Lou Rittmaster, the man who, in 1976, picked up a discarded set of drawers off the street to turn into an ark. He was tuning into the High Holy Day live stream from his home in Florida.²²²

CBST's Yom Kippur services showcase the nuanced ways in which the synagogue has engaged with and negotiated space since 1973. The community creates a home away from home by congregating and praying together. Now, in the age of the internet, CBST has the capacity not just to reach people in new ways, but also to allow people to attend services from around the world. The discursive space forged in the 1970s has shifted with the times into a virtual space, and that virtual space—where people can see and hear each other while sharing lived moments—*is* CBST's actualized terrain. And, in a funny turn of events, it is some of CBST's original members like Rittmaster, those who helped to create and narrativize CBST's first wanderings and homes in the 1970s, who now tune in virtually.

²²¹ Cohen, 168.

²²² Sharon Kleinbaum, "Yom Kippur 5784: Rabbi Kleinbaum's Yizkor Reflection: Memories of AIDS Crisis and Irving Cooperberg," September 25, 2023, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_Ln-_cRJ58&t=1513s.

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