



Synagogues of Manhattan, New York

Holly Harlayne Roberts

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This book is a photographic journey of the synagogues of Manhattan, New York. The journey begins in 1654, when a ship carrying the first group of Jews to inhabit North America landed on a small island off the Atlantic coast, known to the Lenape Indians as 'Manhattan.' This group of Sephardic Jews had been forced to leave Brazil when the Portuguese captured it from the Dutch, bringing the Spanish Inquisition with them. Through a series of mishaps, of the 2,000 Jews fleeing Brazil, one particular ship carrying twenty-three Jews was inadvertently diverted to Manhattan Island. These Jews took root and in 1682 established Manhattan's first synagogue, Shearith Israel. Since that time, New York has been home and haven to millions of Jews. Over the next two hundred years, small groups of Jews from around the world began immigrating to New York City. The year 1881 marked the beginning of the largest immigration wave to the United States. Many blamed the assassination of Alexander II of Russia on "the Jews," and anti-Semitic prejudices triggered numerous anti-Jewish pogroms and anti-Jewish laws. Over three million Jews left Europe to find refuge in America, with more than a million settling in New York, particularly in Manhattan's Lower East Side. New York's Jewish population increased from 80,000 in 1880 to 1,600,000 by 1920. As of 2001, 1.97 million Jews live in the New York City Metropolitan Area. Outside Israel, New York City has the world's largest Jewish community. Approximately twelve percent of all people living in New York City's five boroughs are Jewish or of Jewish descent, and an even higher percent, twenty-one percent, of Manhattan's 1,585,873 residents are Jewish. Manhattan's Synagogues cover the gamut of Jewish diversity, from enormous to quaint, ultraorthodox to reform, Ashkenazi to Sephardic, and wealthy to 'just skimming by.' Some are traditional, while others serve predominantly gay, lesbian and trans-sexual members. Some cost thousands of dollars a year to join, while others are free. Some are housed in huge Gothic style edifices, while others are struggling in storefronts, sharing space in churches, or simply gathering in private apartments. Yet all have the essential Jewish vibrancy, joy, and ideals that Judaism radiates. And, all congregations share the desire to preserve Judaism's ancient and sacred heritage, to inspire the children, to follow tradition, and most of all, to praise and honor G-d. It could not be mere coincidence that Manhattan, the tiny island where Jews first set foot in North America over 350 years ago, and where Jews have been permitted to thrive ever since, would become the largest and most prosperous city in all America. For is it not written - The Lord said to Abram: "And I will bless those who bless you," "And all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you." Bereishis - Genesis - Chapter 12:2-3.

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