

**Where Did the Women Worship?
The History and Architecture of Spaces for
Women in American Synagogues
January 26, 2026**



For more than a millennium, Jewish worship spaces emphatically separated the sexes, and with a few exceptions, discouraged regular female participation. That is still the case in most synagogues of the world and in Orthodox synagogues in the United States.

Beginning in the 19th century, however, as new forms of Jewish worship developed first in Europe and even more so in 19th-century America, the role of women increased in synagogue life. By the mid-19th century in many American Reform synagogues women and men could sit together. Women were still forbidden from publicly reading the Torah or officiating in regular religious services, but they were more visible in the synagogue, and overall, in Jewish public life. In the 20th and 21st centuries, Jewish women have forged an identity of their own that draws on Jewish and American values and sensibilities. In Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative American synagogues women participate – and officiate – in every synagogue capacity. In many American Orthodox congregations, women also take prominent roles, and newly designed Orthodox synagogues often follow a separate and almost-equal design strategy.

In this illustrated talk, art and architectural historian Dr. Samuel Gruber will present a fascinating overview of the role of women in Jewish worship space, focusing specifically on the types of physical spaces

allowed to women in European and American synagogue architecture from the 18th century until today. Dr. Gruber will present historical material much of which comes from his own continuing investigation of synagogue buildings and other Jewish places throughout the world.

Samuel D. Gruber has been a leader in the documentation, protection, and preservation of historic Jewish sites worldwide for 35 years. He was founding director of the Jewish Heritage Program of World Monuments Fund (1988-1996) and Research Director of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad (1998 through 2008). He presently directs Gruber Heritage Global, a cultural resource consulting firm and is president of the not-for-profit International Survey of Jewish Monuments. He has taught courses in Art History and Jewish Studies at Syracuse, Binghamton, Colgate, Cornell, and Temple Universities. Dr. Gruber writes and lectures about Jewish art and architecture, and is author of *American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community* (2003), and *Synagogues* (1999). He has curated two on-line exhibitions for the College of Charleston: and [*Life of the Synagogue*](#) and [*Synagogues of the South*](#), and helped organize the project to document all synagogue of South Carolina. In addition, Dr. Gruber has recently curated the physical exhibition "A Sacred Space: Synagogue Architecture and Identity" at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Dr. Gruber received his BA from Princeton University and his Ph.D. from Columbia University.