

Cahners

# INTERIOR DESIGN

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Fantasy, *Prayer*, Fun





# Vessel of Light

Alexander Gorlin draws on traditional

accounts of Creation to form a contemporary stage for religious worship at a New York Hebrew Academy.

A RECENT ADDITION to the North Shore Hebrew Academy, an Orthodox Jewish school in Kings Point, Long Island, the synagogue and auditorium designed by Alexander Gorlin accommodate students and their families for religious services and other school programs. "The school didn't have a proper auditorium," explains Gorlin, "and they invited me to make a proposal. I presented seven design schemes and, fortunately, the building committee selected the most adventurous one."

Zoning restrictions limited the building height to 18 ft. above the entrance level; Gorlin responded by excavating 4 ft. of earth and sinking the new structure to gain appropriate interior loft. Situated between the cafeteria

and classroom wings, the 4,000-sq.-ft. chapel joins the school's other, circa 1960 structures with its red brick and wood-trim exterior and flat roof—a modest exterior that masks an awesome burst of light, form, and iconography within. Gorlin compares the synagogue to those built in medieval Venice, where unassuming, blank exterior walls concealed and protected their elaborate interiors.

Two distinct versions of the Creation myth, along with references to other traditional Jewish texts, guided the synagogue's architectural development. The first derives from the well-known account in the Book of Genesis, and the second from the more obscure Zohar, the central text of the body of mystical thought known as Kabbalah. According to Kabbalah, the world was created when God withdrew within himself, creating a void in time and space through which appeared rays of colored light known as Sefirot. The Sefirot flowed into a series of vessels that broke because they could not hold the force of the primordial lights. Once this original order was smashed, human history began to unfold. →



*Left: The synagogue seats 175 people. Benches, side walls, and Bimah platform are made of white oak.*

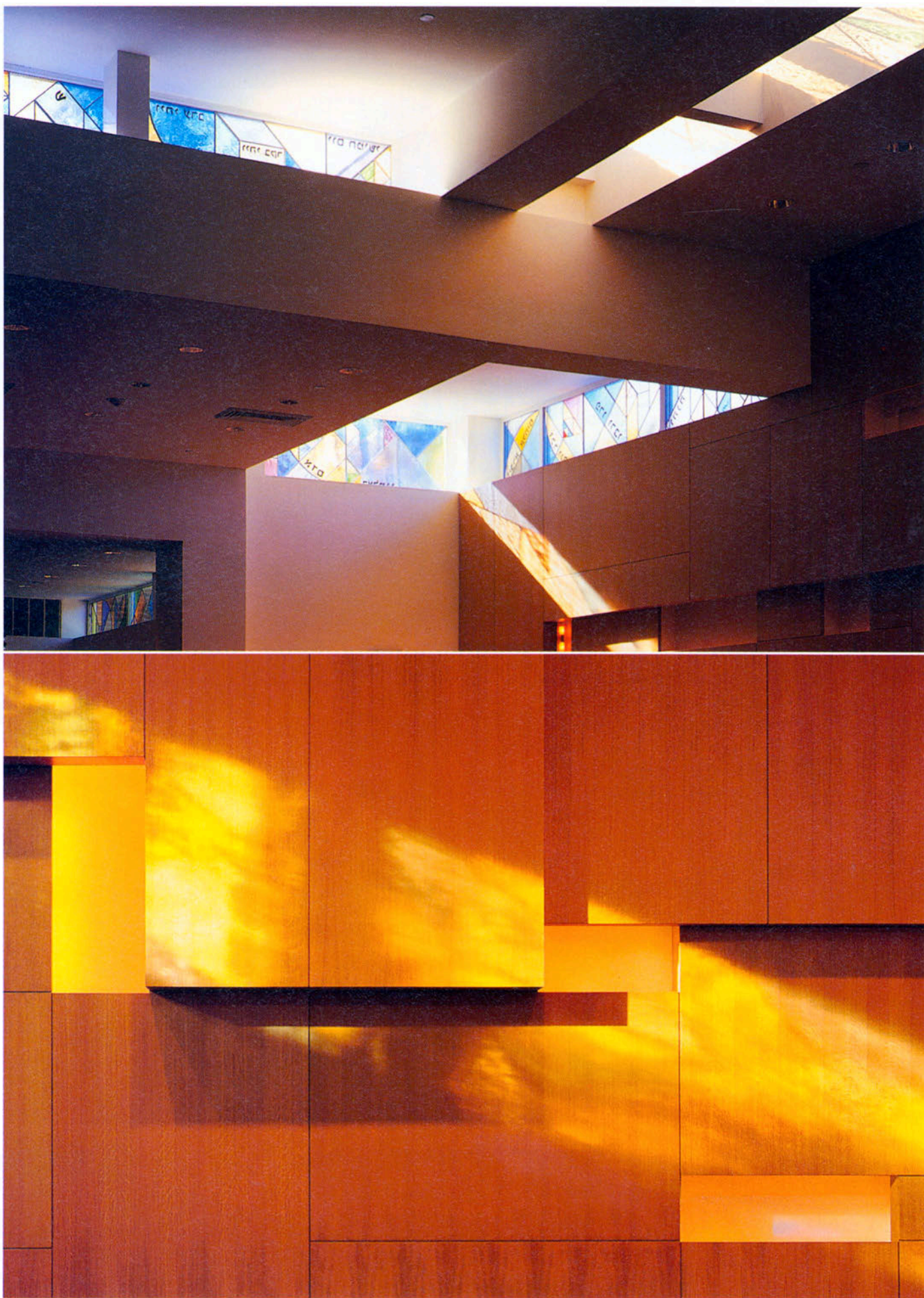
*Opposite: Beneath a large skylight, glass panels within an aluminum framework bring light into the synagogue while also illuminating the interior of the Ark. The Ark itself is made of white oak and glass with hand-sanded brass doors. A velvet curtain covers the Torah scrolls; its design depicts the interrelationship of cosmic forces according to the Kabbalah.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER AARON, ESTO













These ideas are reinterpreted in the architectonic forms of the synagogue, particularly in the way that light is brought into the partly-buried interior. Above the Ark (the vitrine that holds the Torah scrolls) is a large recessed skylight. Light passes through what Gorlin calls the "Cube," an aluminum and glass construction, and falls through the glazed ceiling of the Ark itself so that the Torah chamber appears to glow. Around the edges of the room, a band of clerestory windows allows the roof to hover while admitting daylight through colored glass printed with text from both Genesis and the Zohar. The biblical writing is transcribed in linear phrases while verses from the Kabbalah appear in a more fragmented, discontinuous manner. Luminous vitrines imbedded within the wooden side walls of the synagogue further wrap the interior in light.

Gorlin developed the Cube with reference to the biblical description of the cubic Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon. The Cube's interior holds inverted triangles of

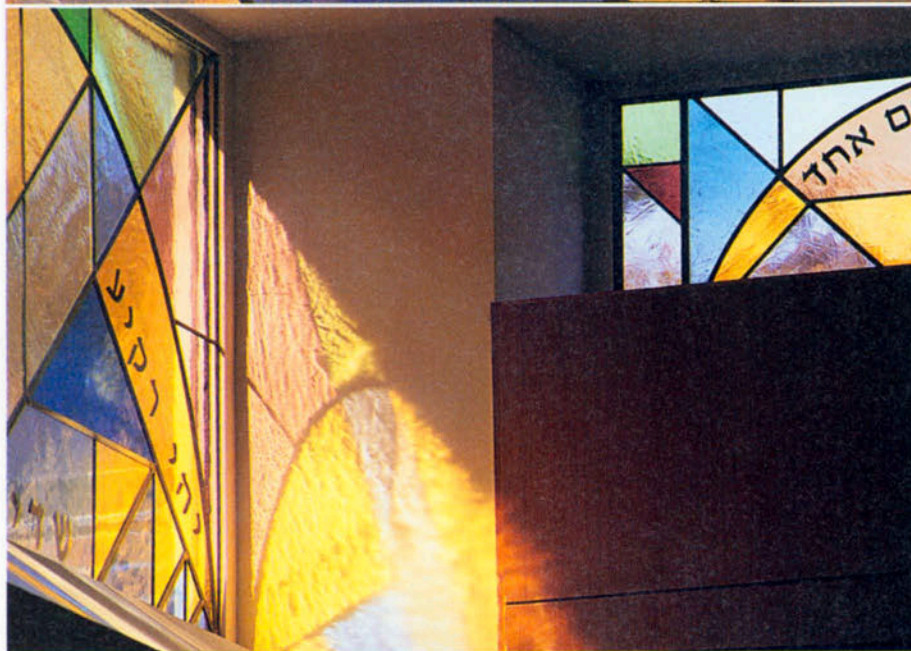
translucent and clear glass that bounce sound towards the rear of the chapel during parts of the service when the cantor turns towards the Ark. The triangles appear to shift in relation to the observer's point of view, and resemble the diagram of the Sefirot that Gorlin specified for the curtain that covers the Torah. Light reflects and refracts off these planes, creating an air of mystery and energy meant to evoke the original "breaking of the vessels." The triangles coalesce into the six-pointed Star of David at one point, visible only from the cantor's platform, and the entire figure is reiterated, at →

*Opposite, above: Clerestory windows evoke the primordial "breaking of the vessels," filling the gap between wall and ceiling with light. Lightly stained glass allows for views to the trees and sky beyond.*

*Opposite, below: Side walls, made of white oak paneling, form an abstract pattern that encompasses luminous glass vitrines.*

*Above: Overall, a sense of modern elegance and simplicity prevails in the synagogue.*





a much smaller scale, in the suspended glass enclosure that houses the Eternal Light.

Gorlin's project is dense with textual references, yet these are assembled with a deft interpretive touch that yields an evocative space for worship. By creatively engaging ancient texts, and allowing divergent strands of Judaic thought to commingle, Gorlin has found a way to stretch the conventions of contemporary synagogue design towards something more poetic, inclusive, and fresh. His design reveals the delicate interplay of continuity and change as it brings together a complex mixture of pure and fractured geometries.

Also participating on the North Shore Hebrew Academy synagogue project were Jason Federbush, Glenn Goble, and David Gissen.

—Henry Urbach

*This page: The story of Creation is told around the clerestory windows, through passages from the Book of Genesis and fragments from the Zohar.*

*Opposite: The glass enclosure for the Eternal Light hangs within the cubic frame above the Ark.*

SEATING: VALLEY CITY MANUFACTURING CO. MILLWORK: GILBERT WOODWORKING. ARK CURTAIN: LAH INTERNATIONAL. METALWORK: AILERON DESIGN. RECESSED LIGHTING: EDISON PRICE. CARPETING: KARASTAN BIGELOW. STAINED GLASS FABRICATION: SUNLITES STAINED GLASS. ETERNAL LIGHT: DOUGLAS HANSEN AND ASSOCIATES. LIGHTING CONSULTANT: KUGLER TILLOTSON ASSOCIATES. STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: ROSS DALLAND. MECHANICAL ENGINEER: SHELTON LAZAN. CONSULTING ARCHITECT: STEPHEN RAY FELLMAN. CONTRACTOR: P.J. WYER CONSTRUCTION.



