CHAPTER 3

The Synagogue

And all of the work was completed in the month of Elul, in the year 4864. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, one of the elders came and said to the community: “Come, let us carry the Ark up to the house, which we have firmly established upon its foundation.” And the elders of the community, the Priests and the Levites, carried the Scrolls of the Torah, with great joy, to the Ark in the synagogue, and they have remained there to this day. On the following day, on Rosh Hashanah, we began to pray therein, and we have prayed there to this day.1

Thus the Crusade chronicle attributed to R. Solomon b. Samson, describes the dedication of the newly rebuilt synagogue in Speyer in September 1104, some eight and one half years after Crusaders attacked the community in May 1096.

Historians have long emphasized the central role played by the synagogue in the medieval Ashkenazic community. It was the pivot around which medieval Jewish life turned. It was the place where Divine worship was conducted. Communal, educational and social life was organized within its precincts.2 It was therefore most appropriate for the chronicle’s author to signal the recovery of Mainz Jewry from the trauma of the First Crusade through a description of its synagogue’s rededication. Closer examination of that description reveals that it is replete with Biblical imagery that invokes the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.3 Was this merely standard religious rhetoric? Or did the author

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wish to convey a deeper message, implying that more than a synagogue was being sanctified?

The conceptual link between the Temple and the Synagogue in Jewish literature is clearly attested to in Talmudic times; it is a leitmotif of all post-Talmudic discussions concerning the synagogue. Nevertheless, there are significant differences of emphasis and nuance among the post-Talmudic traditions as to how this identification of Temple and Synagogue was to be understood.

These differences are of no small import. The degree to which one understands the idea of Synagogue as standing in loco Templi has serious halakhic, behavioral, spiritual and experiential implications. Thus, consideration of the context in which this passage was used should open the way to understanding how the synagogue was perceived, defined and experienced in medieval Franco-Germany.

*Miqdash Me’at*

The conceptual ties between the Holy Temple and the synagogue start with a passage in Ezekiel: ‘Thus says the Lord God: Although I have removed them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet have I been to them as a lesser sanctuary in the countries where they have come’ [Emphasis added-JRW]. The plain meaning of the verse is that God Himself will be the ‘lesser sanctuary’ for His far-flung, exiled people. Indeed, this is how the thirteenth century Provençal exegete, R. David Qimhi (1160–1235),

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5 Yisrael Ta Shma first highlighted the novelty and the difficulties that inhered to the Ashkenazic approach, though his discussion is extremely limited. See Y. Ta-Shema, “Miqdash Me’at”: *Ha-Semel ve-ha-Mamashut,’ in Knesset Ezra: Mehqarim ha-Mugashim le-Khvod Professor Ezra Fleisher*, ed. S. Elitzur et al., Jerusalem: Makhon Ben Zvi 1995, 351–364.

6 Ezek. 11, 20.