THE SUN RAYS ON TOP OF THE TORAH ARK:
A DIALOGUE WITH THE AUREOLE, THE CHRISTIAN SYMBOL OF THE DIVINITY ON TOP OF THE ALTARPIECE*

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In 1837, when the Hatam Sofer (Moshe Sofer, Frankfurt-am-Main 1762—Presburg 1839) was asked whether the depiction of sun rays upon a window in a synagogue is in accordance with the halakhah (Jewish religious law), he could not foresee how relevant that matter would be a few decades later. His reply to that question in his Teshuvot [Responsa] (Part II, Yoreh De’ah, §129), mentions a ‘synagogue in which they had made, within a glassed window, an image of the orb of the sun with rays of light radiating outwards like the rising sun, inside of which was written the Divine Name, and adjacent to it the verse, “From east to west the name of the Lord is praised” ’ (Ps 113:3).

That anonymous synagogue was probably among the earliest European synagogues to present a Jewish representation of the divinity based upon the aureole, the visual image of the divinity. From the mid-nineteenth century on, sun rays on top of the Torah ark became a well-known motif in European synagogues. It is composed of sun rays arranged as a semicircle or as a complete circle shining upwards with the name of God in its center, as seen in the Dohány Synagogue in Budapest, designed by Ludwig Förster and consecrated in 1859 (fig. 1), or in the Great Synagogue of Timișoara, Romania, designed by Lipot Baumhorn and consecrated in 1899 (Gruber 1999, 16). In the Dohány Synagogue the sun form is repeated above the Torah ark in a round window, through which the actual sun rays penetrate the prayer hall. An additional reference to the sun appears on top of the upper arch, in the inscription ‘From east to west the name of the Lord is praised’.

I would like to thank my colleagues Dr. Sergey R. Kravtsov, Dr. Ilia Rodov and Aviva Levine for their useful comments on this article. Except for the common English spelling for Cracow, the eastern European geographic names are given in their contemporary form.

1 For a comprehensive discussion of this synagogue, see Klein 2007.
praised’. The literal Hebrew translation of this verse is ‘From where the sun rises to where it sets...’. Sun rays became the dominant motif in the design of the monumental synagogues that were built all over Europe in celebration of the emancipation granted to the Jews around the end of the nineteenth century.

But when the Hatam Sofer was asked about the depiction of sun rays on a synagogue window, this was a new feature in synagogue design and suspect of idolatry. No doubt, even at first glance these sun rays remind us of the aureole, the Christian symbol of the divinity on the top of the altarpiece, as seen on a side altarpiece in the Bernardine Church in Cracow, where, together with a wreath of clouds, it encircles the symbol of the Trinity in the shape of an eye within a triangle (fig. 2).

This resemblance of the sun rays on top of the Torah ark to the Christian aureole on top of the altarpiece is only one component of the similarity between synagogue architecture of the late nineteenth century and church architecture and design. Most architectonic components were taken for granted by art historians, since the synagogues under discussion were designed by non-Jewish architects and were built as the result of the ongoing tendency for Jewish integration into Christian European society.3 Indeed, the resemblance of any synagogue architecture to local architecture is a well-known phenomenon throughout the Jewish diaspora, and thus need not be discussed here. Our concern is with the sun rays motif upon the eastern wall, namely on top of or above Holy Arks which were designed and built by Jewish craftsmen, woodcarvers, and carpenters. Moreover, most instances of the motif discussed here were, to our surprise, also expressing concepts similar to those of the Christian visual symbol for the Divinity.

The first stages of this research made it clear that the earliest depiction of the sun rays motif was in eastern European synagogues of the eighteenth century. Most of these synagogues no longer exist; therefore our research is based on archival material, mainly photographs taken in the course of the early twentieth century. These black-and-white photographs were taken, systematically or randomly, mainly by architects

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2 Since the Middle Ages Jews were dependent on non-Jewish architects in synagogue planning, as they were not allowed to join the guild of architects.

3 About these synagogues and the activity of non-Jewish architects in the flourishing wave of synagogue construction in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Wischnitzer 1964, 171–230; Jarrassé 2001, 145–203; and others.