



A Guide for the Perplexed:



A Newcomer's Primer to  
Congregation Shearith Israel



## Welcome to Shearith Israel

Whether you are a first time visitor, a new member, or even a regular attendee of our extraordinary services, most congregants enjoy a deeper appreciation of our service and our community after they have become familiar with our unique *minhag*, customs, and liturgy as well as our culture and style. This booklet, conceived in a user-friendly Q&A format, was created in the hopes that you will become an active and confident participant in our service in whatever way most suits you. If you have any further questions, please let us know. Your input may even help us when we issue a version 2.0 of this guide!

## Our History

### **I heard that Shearith Israel is the oldest congregation in America. Is that true?**

That is correct. Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in the City of New York, was founded in 1654, the first Jewish congregation to be established in North America. Its founders were twenty-three Jews, mostly of Spanish and Portuguese origin, who had been living in Recife, Brazil. When the Portuguese defeated the Dutch for control of Recife, and brought with them the Inquisition, the Jews of that area left. Some returned to Amsterdam, where they had originated. Others went to places in the Caribbean such as St. Thomas, Jamaica, Suriname and Curacao, where they founded sister Sephardic congregations. One group of twenty-three Jews, after a series of unexpected events, landed in New Amsterdam. They were not welcomed by Governor Peter Stuyvesant, who did not wish to permit Jews to settle there. However, these pioneers fought for their rights and won permission to remain. By 1730, they consecrated their first synagogue building on Mill Street (what today is known as South William Street). Five synagogue buildings and nearly 365 years later... we're still here today!

### **This synagogue is commonly referred to as the Spanish and Portuguese? Do I need to be of Spanish or Portuguese (or Sephardic) decent to attend services and become a member here?**

Absolutely not! From its earliest days, Shearith Israel was the spiritual home to both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. Although the synagogue service follows the Western Sephardic tradition of Spanish and Portuguese Jews, our membership is diverse, and indeed takes pride and thrives in large measure, as a result of our diversity.



### **The main gates of the synagogue are on Central Park West and yet I've been directed to the side entrance on West 70th St. Why is that?**

Although this 1897 building was designed by the prominent Jewish architect, Arnold Brunner, with a grand entrance facing Central Park, Brunner might not have anticipated how this entrance would affect the flow of services. Flowing directly into the eastern side of the sanctuary, immediately adjacent to both sides of the *hehal* (the ark), a constant or intermittent flow of congregants would be disruptive to the service. Therefore, except for very special services and occasions, we enter the building using the more humble 2 West 70th Street entrance. During the week and summer shabbatot, services are held in the Small Synagogue. Shabbat and holiday services are held in the Large Synagogue. A member of our security team is at the door ready to direct you to the men's and women's sections accordingly.

## Attire

### **What should I wear? What is considered appropriate attire?**

When entering the sanctuary (the Large or Small Synagogue), it is always appropriate for a boy or man to wear a kippah and for married women to cover their hair. Kippot and chapel caps are available at the entrance of the building. Proper or modest attire is also advised, and we leave it to our congregants and guests to exercise good judgment.

On Shabbat and holidays we dress in a more festive manner that closely resembles business attire, except for our presiding officiants, who are dressed in formal attire (including those not-so-comfortable top hats) that varies depending on the holiday. You will find that some of our men enjoy donning a hat—a fedora, a homburg, and perhaps a panama in the summer. Back in the day, men seated in the



front row were required to wear a hat. We have loosened up just a bit since then, but men are still required to wear a hat when called to the *teba* for an *aliya*. We keep a stock of loaners on hand for anyone who needs one. Most women wear a sleeved dress or top and skirt (not too short please). Pashmina wraps are also available in the women's section for women who are feeling chilly (our air conditioners can occasionally be quite powerful).

### **Why do I see some very young boys wearing a tallit?**

It is one of those distinguishing customs of our congregation that all males of whatever age wear a tallit, which can be found in the back of the sanctuary on either side as you enter. (Zachary Edinger, our helpful Shamash, or someone else close to one of the entrances will gladly provide you with one.) The custom was prevalent among the Western Sephardic Jews and remains quite assiduously observed at Shearith Israel that boys, even before becoming a bar mitzvah, and young men, even if not married, wear a tallit. We do not seek to alter anyone's custom when not with us, but in our house of worship we ask that you respect this custom. However, although it is also an age-old custom among the Sephardim to wear the tallit over one's head or hat, we generally do not do that at Shearith Israel.

### **Can you tell me about the clergy's attire?**

Our clergy-- the rabbis (also still referred to as ministers) and *hazzanim*-- wear canonicals consisting of ministerial gowns, lace collars, and clergy caps whenever they are leading the congregation in prayer. These outfits are indeed reminiscent of 18th century protestant ministers, which makes perfect sense given that our rabbis were the very first rabbis in America and had no American rabbinic model to follow. In fact, up until our 7th minister, Dr. David de Sola Pool, our rabbis wore their canonicals throughout the day and on the street—like many priests still do today. Thanks to Rabbi Dr. Pool, our rabbis can choose their own attire when not leading services.



**Speaking of attire, the torahs in the ark are dressed so beautifully and it seems they even have different wardrobes for different occasions. Can you tell me about that?**

True. The torahs are probably the best dressed of anyone in the room and indeed don various colored mantles depending on the occasion. On most shabbatot they wear their “standard” red mantles but on festivals, Rosh Hodesh, and consecration shabbatot (those shabbatot that commemorate the consecration of each of the five synagogue buildings throughout our congregation’s history), they switch to dusty pastels. Finally, on the High Holidays the torahs are dressed in angelic whites.

## The Service and Decorum

**I see several different books in the rack in front of my seat. Which ones should I use?**

We use the blue prayer books translated and edited by Dr. David de Sola Pool, who served as our minister from 1907 until his death in 1970. For Torah reading and Haftarah reading, we have two options: the blue Hertz *humash* and the more recent purple Kaplan *humash*. Both editions include English translation and every week you will find the page number for the week’s portion and haftarah listed on our Shabbat handout that you were given when you walked in the door. Use whichever book you like best.

**I’ve noticed congregants sitting during parts of the service where, in other synagogues, the congregation stands. Shearith Israel also sits while the ark is open. What’s all this about?**

Sitting and standing matter at Shearith Israel. The Congregation stands when the Torah is “on the move” – that is, being taken from or to the *hehal* (ark). Otherwise, because the *hehal* is on a different level than the ground of the synagogue or the women’s balcony, it is permissible, and indeed it is our long-observed custom, to sit even when the *hehal* is



opened. Other apparent oddities are that we sit during the prayer for the governments. This is an ancient custom of Shearith Israel; indeed it goes back to the time when our congregation refused to stand to pay homage to King George of England at the time of the American Revolution (by then we, as a congregation, were over 120 years old). If you feel very uncomfortable sitting while the *hehal* is open, or if it is your custom to stand when the Torah is read, please consider following our custom while you are with us – or if the discomfort interferes with your enjoyment of the service, consider standing in the back rows of the pews.

**I’ve noticed that when a man fulfills a ritual role or *kibbud* there are formal exchanges of bows rather than the handshaking and “*yasher koachs*” that are more commonplace at other synagogues. Is there any particular significance to this?**

Although handshaking may go back even further than Shearith Israel, to Ancient Greece, as a gesture of peace by demonstrating that the hand holds no weapon, bowing is an even older gesture. And while bowing to a monarch, and certainly to the Lord, shows one’s subordination, a mutual bow between men may actually demonstrate our equality to each other. Whatever the original reason, this custom is perhaps just one more example of where we hold on to the forms of days past as a show of our connection to our forebears. And we like it too.

**I was surprised that during *Mussaf* there was no silent *Amida*; the hazzan launched right into the recitation.**

That’s right. Rather than a private silent *Amida* followed by the hazzan’s repetition, we follow the Rambam’s (Maimonides) practice thereby avoiding what has often become idle time or worse. And yes, it does speed up the latter part of our Shabbat morning services considerably, a not unwelcome development given the slow, deliberate, and beloved procession when the Torah is returned to the ark.



**The procession following the reading of the Torah certainly is unique and most dramatic. Can you tell me more about it?**

What is most noticeable about how we conduct this procession is how very slowly the officiants approach the ark. This custom stems directly from the halakha that says that one should part from the Torah reluctantly and never with haste. This is a most beloved part of our dignified service.

**I am in mourning. May I say Kaddish during Shabbat services?**

At Shearith Israel, as with many other congregations, we do not have public displays of mourning on Shabbat or holidays. Still, there is one Kaddish recited on Friday night and one early on Shabbat morning, before the service officially begins. The congregation also has a custom of singing along with the Hazzan when he chants the Kaddish on Friday night after the *Amida* repetition. It is also a custom among some mourners, both women and men, to say that Kaddish as well.

**On that topic, is it true that there is no *yizkor* service at Shearith Israel?**

That is correct. Many of our members who grew up, or are otherwise accustomed to Ashkenazi synagogues, find it initially jarring, almost an act of betrayal to the memory of their loved ones, when joining us for a major festival service to not pray *yizkor*. But most come to understand that *yizkor*, a relatively newer addition to the Ashkenazi service was never incorporated into the Sephardic service. Instead we offer memorial *hashcabot*, a prayer recited on the *nahala*, what we call the anniversary of the death (*yahrzeit*), and on every Shabbat and festival. The very individualized recognition of the mourner on this date punctuated by fellow congregants wishing him or her “*shanim rabot*” (many years) can be quite moving as well as heartening.



**I know that it’s never 100% okay to start removing my tallit during *Adon Olam*, but it’s common practice in so many synagogues. Is this a total faux pas at Shearith Israel?**

Yes. We place a higher premium on decorum and dignity than most synagogues and respectfully ask that you wait to remove your tallit until services are completely over.

**I am concerned that with all the formality that I may feel out of place or somehow judged. Be honest, should I be concerned?**

One of the paradoxes about the Shearith Israel experience is that our service is exceptionally structured and dignified and yet our congregational “vibe” is as laid back and non-judgmental as the service is formal. Newcomers are struck by how visibly diverse our community is. While we have dress codes, no one feels judged by their fashion choices. Indeed, we probably have less need for “enforcement” of codes of conduct than other more “relaxed” synagogues because most congregants cannot help but attune themselves to the elevated atmosphere of the space and the service.

**I really enjoyed the Rabbi’s talk. Are there any other opportunities to hear him speak?**

In addition to our Rabbi’s Friday Night Lights lectures that take place immediately following kabbalat shabbat during the winter, his Shabbat morning sermons and seminars, and his Shabbat afternoon classes which are generally held one hour before *mincha*, the Rabbi gives weekday shiurim on a number of fascinating topics including early American Jewish History, Talmud, Jewish Law (halakha), and more. The best way to learn about his classes is to join our email lists at [shearithisrael.org/join-our-mailing-lists](http://shearithisrael.org/join-our-mailing-lists).



## I have no arrangements for a Shabbat or holiday meal. Can you help?

Absolutely. We often—but not always—offer an ample community kiddush luncheon following Shabbat or holiday morning services. The food is varied and tasty, and our communal kiddush is a wonderful opportunity to get to know our welcoming community. But for Friday nights and other Saturdays, we will gladly arrange for you to be hosted by one of our hospitable families. To arrange for hospitality in advance (which we do appreciate) call the office at **212-873-0300** or speak to **Zachary Edinger**.

## Sing with the choir or listen and enjoy?

The service at Shearith Israel, like those of Sephardim generally, was designed to be a sung service. Please, learn our tunes; they are beautiful. And then quietly but not silently sing along with the choir. It will enhance and enrich your experience of our beautiful service—your experience and that of others, too.

## Membership Inquiries

### I think I'm interested in membership. How do I get more information?

We're always happy to welcome new members. Shearith Israel's Executive Director, Barbara Reiss, would be delighted to speak with you. Please feel free to reach out to her by e-mail or phone:

**[breiss@shearithisrael.org](mailto:breiss@shearithisrael.org)**  
**212-873-0300 x215**

Also, information and applications are available online at [shearithisrael.org/membership](http://shearithisrael.org/membership). We'd love to hear from you!

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