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THE ST JOHN'S WOOD SYNAGOGUE

HIGH HOLY DAYS COMPANION



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The David Hillman Stained Glass windows in St John's Wood Synagogue

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Praying in St John's Wood Synagogue every Shabbat and Festival is not only a spiritual experience but also an artistic one. The over one hundred David Hillman stained glass windows adorning the Shul are amongst the most unique sets of shul windows to be found anywhere in the world, both quantitatively

and qualitatively. They are not the only Hillman windows in existence – others may be found in numerous London synagogues, including Marble Arch, Great Portland Street, Brondesbury, Borehamwood, Hampstead Garden Suburb, Woodside Park and Egerton Road (now a centre for the Bobov Hasidim) - some of them originally designed for these places and others transferred from other Shuls which have since permanently shut their doors, such as Bayswater, Cricklewood and New Cross. One window, originally in Bayswater, depicting the Purim festival, is actually to be found in the stained glass window museum at Ely Cathedral!

Hillman was himself a resident of St John's Wood and as a child, I recall visiting his house in Priory Road one Sunday afternoon (he was my great-uncle) and being taken up to the attic studio where most of the windows were designed and created. He carried out most of the work by himself, with one assistant, and considering the sheer number of windows currently in existence (outside London and in Israel too), it is mind-boggling to contemplate the amount of effort which he put into his life's work.

Hillman was an interesting character. His father was Rabbi Shmuel Hillman, head of the London Beth Din during the 1920s and 1930s, having arrived in London from Lithuania via Glasgow, where the family spent their first years in the United Kingdom and where Rabbi Hillman had been appointed communal Rabbi before being called to serve in the Beth Din by

Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz. While growing up as a young lad in Glasgow, David Hillman would have befriended another young man, Isaac Wolfson (later to be knighted), and it is therefore hardly surprising that in later years, it was Wolfson who sponsored many of his windows – particularly those at Great Portland Street (often known as ‘Sir Isaac’s’, this being the shul Wolfson attended and whose reconstruction he financed after its destruction by the Blitz in World War II) and at the original Great Synagogue edifice in Jerusalem, known as Hechal Shlomo.

Hillman’s sister was married to Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog, the former Chief Rabbi of Dublin, later to become the first Chief Rabbi of Israel as successor to Rav Kook upon his death in the 1930s. In other words, David Hillman was the uncle of President Haim Herzog and great-uncle of the recently appointed head of the Jewish Agency (and former leader of the Israel Labour Party) Isaac “Bouji” Herzog. In his autobiography, the late President mentions his numerous visits to London both as a soldier during WWII and as a student, when he stayed with Hillman in Priory Road and, inter alia, developed his love of opera. In a recent lecture in Jerusalem about the Hillman windows given by me, Herzog (the younger) introduced the topic and his family connections, and it would not be unthinkable for him to do likewise at SJW in his new role as Chairman of the Jewish Agency.

His wife, Dr. Annie Hillman, was also the daughter of a well-known London Rabbi, Jacob Rabinowitz, who had originally emigrated from Eastern Europe at the close of the nineteenth century to become the Rabbi of Edinburgh (a Lithuanian –

Scottish connection) – subsequently moving to London where he served as Rabbi of the Montagu Road Beth Hamedrash in Dalston. Annie Hillman was a well-known GP who secured the household’s livelihood because her husband himself was evidently no businessman and made very little money from his artistic endeavours.

Hillman had three children, all sons, one of whom, Ellis, was a well-known Labour politician and briefly the Mayor of Barnet. Another son, Professor Harold Hillman, was a micro-biologist at the University of Surrey, while the third, Mayer (Mickey), trained as an architect and town planner, and, whilst still living in Hampstead with some original and unfinished material of his father in the house, became renowned for his radical environmental

“Hillman’s windows are rooted in Jewish tradition and texts.”

views (recently the subject of a weekend feature article in the Guardian). David Hillman’s brothers-in-law included Rabbi Dr. Louis Rabinowitz, later to become Chief Rabbi of South Africa and, briefly, deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, and Rabbi Yehuda (Julius) Newman of the Notting Hill synagogue. Thus he had



One of the many Hillman windows in the synagogue.

strong roots in the rabbinical world, a fact that also influenced his artistic endeavours.

The windows are unique in that they depart from previous shul windows in their Jewish style. They are not the type of stained glass windows which were more common in contemporary churches (albeit with a Jewish motif), and which were to be found in many of the cathedral-style synagogues erected at the end of the nineteenth century throughout England. Hillman’s windows are rooted in Jewish tradition and texts. Hillman was an ordained Rabbi (as a young man he actually served for several years as Rabbi of Sandy’s Row Synagogue in the East End) and his vast knowledge of texts – from Bible, Talmud,

Aggadah and other sources – are brought to bear on many of his windows, frequently containing lengthy quotations, to an extent not to be found on any other set of windows in the world.

Dayan Hillman was displeased with his son’s decision to become an artist rather than continue in the family’s lengthy

rabbinic tradition, this having caused a major rift between the two for much of their lives.

Anyone familiar with his style will immediately recognise his windows. He has a set of common themes for all the major festivals and Jewish religious occasions which are to be found in nearly all the synagogues, although each theme developed over time with additions and alterations. His work encompassed the period from the 1920s onwards until his death in 1972, while some of the most recent St John's Wood windows were completed by his daughter-in-law, Louise Hillman, after his death, particularly those in the ladies' gallery.

The St John's Wood windows are also unique in that they were completed at two distinct stages in Hillman's career. The middle three of each set of five windows in the main shul were originally designed for the Abbey Road synagogue, now the New London. When SJW built its new shul in the mid- 1960's in Grove End Road, they were transferred, but

it was necessary to supplement them with additional windows. The two outer ones of each set, together with the upstairs windows, were made at this time and the differences in style and use of colours is plain for all to see. SJW also contains themes not found in any of the other synagogues (see the beautiful Jerusalem windows in the right-hand side of the ladies' gallery at SJW).

The three most famous windows, originally consecrated in Abbey Road, are to be found on the right of the main synagogue,

dedicated respectively to Theodor Herzl, Chaim Weizmann and Mordechai Eliash (the first Israeli ambassador to London) by the Maida Vale Zionist society. In the ladies' gallery, on the left side, there are two windows dedicated to his wife (who predeceased him by several years) and to his father, the late Dayan, while the bottom right has two windows

particularly not orthodox ones, as it transgresses the prohibition against having graven images. The dates on these windows show them to be amongst his latest. Family members insist that he received permission to design them in this fashion from his brother-in-law, the Israeli Chief Rabbi. Be that as it may, this remains a unique feature

of his windows. Most of the faces, however, are covered by a tallit or a hand, including those blowing a Shofar, reading the Torah or lighting the Hanukah candles.

Hillman's windows are not only of interest to worshippers but also constitute a hidden art treasure, unknown even to art lovers, let alone the members of the synagogues in which they are to be found. They merit a far broader recognition as part of Anglo- Jewry's rich artistic heritage. A brief presentation of the windows and their consecration may be found on the staircase leading up to the ladies' gallery of the SJW shul, while Great Portland Street also possesses a commemorative coffee-table book of the

windows. The SJW windows also feature prominently in another recent publication, "The Hundred Best Stained Glass Sites in London" by Caroline Swash – one of four Jewish sites mentioned in the book. I have been fortunate, during my sabbatical in London, to have spent many a Shabbat morning patrolling the windows, invariably discovering a novel feature. When you next visit the shul, do spend some time after the service having a closer look at this amazing Jewish art collection. ●



dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust. With this single exception, surprisingly, almost none of his windows represent themes associated either with the State of Israel or the Holocaust, despite his work having reached its high-point during the 1950s and 1960s.

Another unique feature is that many of his windows include half, and in two cases even full, faces. I have in mind especially the Purim windows at the far right-hand corner of the shul as one enters. This is not generally acceptable in synagogues,