

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Astoria Center of Israel

other name/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 27-35 Crescent St

☐ not for publication

city or town Astoria

N/A vicinity

state New York

code NY

county Queens

code 081

zip code 11102

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ruth A. Perpoint / DSHPO

8/28/09

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register.

☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the
National Register

☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the
National Register.

☐ removed from the National
Register.

☐ other, (explain:)

Astoria Center of Israel
Name of Property

Queens County, New York
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

- ☐ public-local
☒ private
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(check only one box)

- ☐ district
☒ building(s)
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	
1	

buildings
sites
structures
objects
Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed
in the National Register**

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/Religious facility

Current Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/Religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Neo-Classical Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation masonry

walls masonry

roof asphalt

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET
Section number 7 Page 1

DESCRIPTION

Located at 27-35 Crescent Street, the Astoria Center of Israel is on the east side of the street between Newtown and 30th Avenues in the Astoria neighborhood of the borough of Queens in New York City. The boundaries of the property are described as Queens Tax Block 574, Lot 42. The building is flanked by a modern medical center on the south and on the north by single-family homes built at the turn-of-the-twentieth century with small apartment houses across the street. The Astoria Center was built in 1925-26 to designs by architect Louis Allen Abramson. The synagogue is also known for its interior decoration of a series of murals by French artist Louis Rigal commissioned by the congregation in 1929. Today, the Astoria Center of Israel is an early surviving Queens Synagogue and religious center and continues to function as such. Its design is typical of 1920s American synagogues, combining classical detailing with Judaic symbols.

Exterior

The synagogue is a two-story building faced in Flemish-bond striated red brick with faux limestone cast-stone trim and a masonry foundation. Its facade is designed as a modified temple front with six double-height flat Ionic piers that support an architrave in which the frieze is inscribed with the synagogue's name, "Astoria-Center-Of-Israel." Over this is a balustrade of short stone pilasters interspersed with urn shaped stone balusters. The exterior of the building is divided into five bays by the piers with the center bay being the building's principal entrance. At the first story, the center bay has a round-arched cast-stone entryway, approached by several gray granite steps. The wooden double doors are recessed and are topped by a lunette with a simple *magen david* in its center. Each door has a series of four square panels, three of which are adorned with Jewish symbols, e.g. a *menorah*, a *Kiddush* cup, and a pair of hands making the blessing of the *kohanim*. The door frame is flanked on either side by a simple metal light fixture. Over the door frame is an ornamental cartouche with a scroll extending on either side. Within the cartouche is a *magen david*. Each of the two bays on either side has one round-arched window with leaded glass adorned with multi-colored geometric patterns. Each window has a *magen david* in the upper sash. A cornerstone at the south end is inscribed "1925 - 5686 - Astoria Center of Israel." At the second story, each bay is occupied by a tripartite window.

Interior

The main entrance leads to an entrance vestibule that is a small space with a groin-vaulted plaster ceiling. In the center hangs an ornamental metal light fixture. Three of the vestibule sides are round-arched: the entrance, and the walls to either side of it on the south and north. The south wall (to the right as one enters from the street) has a large plaque with a new light fixture above it. The north wall is plain except for a radiator grille at the base. The vestibule leads directly into the lobby that is an elongated octagonal space from which all other first floor interior spaces are reached. On the western side, a doorway south of the entrance vestibule leads into an administrative office, which in turn leads into the rabbi's office. Both of these have largely been redecorated.¹ The doorway north of the entrance vestibule leads to another office, also redecorated, which in turn leads into a small chapel. On the eastern side of the lobby, opposite the entrance vestibule is the entrance to the main sanctuary. To its right and left are other doorways, one leading to the balcony, the other to a staircase to the basement. The north side of the lobby has a recessed sitting area flanked by flat piers with elaborate capitals. Instead of a recessed area on the south side is an entrance to a small room used as a coat closet, beyond which is

¹ Apparently in the 1960s, according to synagogue staff.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET
Section number 7 Page 2

another office area. The coved lobby ceiling is adorned with an elaborate painting by Louis Rigal. Its symmetrical design is based on spiral forms sprouting leafy branches. A chandelier hangs from its center.

On the north side of the building is a narrow rectangular space used as a chapel. It is lit by leaded glass windows similar to those on the front façade in the building's north elevation. The style suggests English Tudor influence evidenced by a beamed ceiling, plaster walls and a paneled wooden ark (receptacle for the Torah scrolls). The ark's two doors are each adorned with the silhouette of a lion, one sitting above a *magen david* over which is superimposed a *menorah*. The other is sitting above a *magen david* over which is superimposed the image of two hands making the blessing of the *Kohanim*. A broken pediment atop the ark encloses the two tablets of the Law. The wall behind the ark is also paneled. Two small ornamental metal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling are adorned with grape clusters and *magen david* forms. The entrance doors include narrow leaded glass windows each with a roundel. One of the roundels shows a *menorah*, the other a Torah scroll.

Main sanctuary:

The main sanctuary is a large, two-story tall, roughly square-room with a rear balcony, plaster walls and an elaborate plaster beamed ceiling. The main sanctuary has three tall, almost floor-to-ceiling leaded glass windows on either side of the ark in a front area, recessed behind what in a theater would be called a proscenium arch. The focal point of the recess is an elaborate ark that is set against a tripartite Palladian-style window. Three windows on either side of the sanctuary are filled with ornamental polychromatic leaded glass. Each window is set within a round arch and flanked on either side by a fluted pilaster rising to an ornate capital that appears to support the ceiling. Each window features a *magen david* inscribed within a circle in its uppermost part and small rectangular memorial panels below. The rest of the glass is set in geometric shapes.

At the rear of the sanctuary, the balcony is flanked by enclosed areas containing staircases. The walls of these areas facing into the sanctuary each include an ornamental arch with ornament painted by Rigal that mimics the round-arched windows on the adjoining side walls. Each of these painted arches encloses a Hebrew inscription above a large memorial plaque. Plaques and inscriptions appear to be later additions. The walls of these areas meet the balcony rail in a pier rising to an ornamental capital. The balcony rail is adorned with a Rigal painting combining stylized olive clusters and branches with a centrally placed *menorah*.

At the front of the sanctuary, plain wall surfaces are on either side each with a doorway and two narrow arched windows above that flank the central proscenium arch leading to the ark. These plain wall surfaces mirror the opposite enclosed stairwells flanking the rear balcony. The proscenium arch itself is adorned with the most elaborate of the Rigal paintings. On the north side (on the left facing the wall), the painting depicts a lion and a deer rearing up on their hind legs and facing each other. The south (right) side depicts a leopard and an eagle in a similar position. Below each set of figures is a painted base with olive clusters and branches surrounding a stylized *magen david*. Above each set of figures, a stylized pattern of branches and olives rises on either side meet at the apex of the arch in the figure of a dove. The area behind the arch has a wall on either side, also covered with an ornamental painting. The rear wall is largely taken up by a large Palladian-style window arrangement of one large round-arched window in the center flanked by a shorter, narrower arched window on either side. The band framing the triple-arched windows is painted with decorative forms.

The ark itself is an aedicular form in *scagliola* (faux marble). A pair of pilasters on either side supports an entablature with and a frieze that has panels inscribed with a *magen david*. Over this rises an elaborate broken

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET
Section number 7 Page 3

pediment. Between the scrolled ends sits a representation of the tablets of the Law, inscribed with the Hebrew words representing the Ten Commandments. The leaded glass windows behind it include a representation of the same tablets. The metal doors of the Ark are inscribed with various Jewish symbols. In front of the Ark to either side are two bronze lamp stands in the shape of a *menorah*. There is also an ornamental wooden pulpit that along with the wooden pews in the sanctuary was added in 1940.² In the ceiling above the ark is an ornamental metal grille admitting daylight.

The sanctuary's ceiling is divided into fifteen enormous square panels with Rigal paintings of repeating designs. Some of the panels are relatively plain, with a border of geometric patterns and curlicues and a similar pattern decorates a band that runs along the rear walls just where it meets the ceiling. Other bands have elaborate symmetrical patterns based on floral forms and still others repeat the paired figures of lion/deer and leopard/eagle, here forming an "X" with interstices filled with olive branches.

Remaining interior spaces include classrooms on the second floor that are located at the west end of the building, above the lobby off of a narrow hallway. On the opposite side of the hallway, a short corridor leads into the rear of the balcony in the sanctuary. A social hall in the basement is a large space located directly below the main sanctuary. It is reached via a staircase from the lobby. Its ceiling is supported by columns. The social hall has been significantly altered with little remaining of its original design.

In general, the Astoria Center of Israel retains a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. It has been continuously maintained as a synagogue since its construction in 1925-26. Alterations primarily affect minor spaces such as offices and classrooms. The main façade, main sanctuary, entrance vestibule, lobby and chapel all survive largely intact.

² They are so identified by a plaque which reads: "pulpit and pews presented by Mr. and Mrs. Bernard D. Klein, 1940."

Astoria Center of Israel
Name of Property

Queens County, New York
County and State

8. Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☒ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering
Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(enter categories from instructions)

Religion

Ethnic Heritage: Jewish

Architecture

Period of Significance

1925-26

Significant Dates

1925

Significant Persons

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Louis Allen Abramson

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☒ Other Name of repository:

Astoria Center of Israel

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 1

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: The Astoria Center of Israel is historically significant under Criterion A in the areas of ethnic history and religion as one of the few early-twentieth century synagogues surviving in the New York City borough of Queens. It is also architecturally significant under Criterion C and Criterion Consideration A as an example of an intact 1920s Neo-Classical Revival style synagogue in the borough of Queens that still serves the local community.

Criteria A: Constructed in 1925-26, the Astoria Center of Israel was originally intended to serve as a religious school and community center for the formerly adjoining synagogue, Congregation Mishkan Israel. From the beginning however, some religious services were held in the building and within a few years the Astoria Center had become a separate synagogue. The Center's name and its incorporation of school and social uses from its inception link it to the "Jewish Center" movement that reached its apogee in the decade in which the Astoria Center was created.

Criterion C and Criterion Consideration A: The Astoria Center of Israel is a high-style design by architect Louis Allen Abramson, considered one of the chief architects of the Jewish Center movement. It is also unusual for its program of murals on Biblical and Talmudic themes added in 1929 by French artist Louis Rigal and its decorative metalwork by prominent metal craftsman Oscar Bach. Although Queens today is home to a sizable Jewish population with hundreds of synagogues large and small, the Astoria Center of Israel is one of the oldest, surviving from a time when the Jewish population of Queens itself was quite small. Today the Center survives as a distinctive architectural, cultural and religious landmark of the Jewish community of New York City.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Development of Astoria and Its Jewish Population¹

Today's Astoria is considered to be the portion of Long Island City situated in the northwest part of Queens, roughly between the Queensboro Bridge and Astoria Boulevard west of LaGuardia Airport. It was originally part of the early town of Newtown that with Flushing and Jamaica was one of the three colonial settlements now comprising the borough of Queens. As described by one author, "For a long time Newtown was the stepchild of the metropolitan area, its backyard, so to speak. Whatever was too offensive for the rest of the area found lodgment there, and the odors from some of its works often aroused indignant protests even from dwellers on Manhattan."² The areas along the waterfront, however, developed as residential areas of Newtown such as "...Ravenswood [that] had invited a colony of home builders of the better class, Hunter's Point has boomed for many years as a suitable site for the homes of Manhattan workingmen, but the lots failed to command anything like attractive prices outside of Astoria."³

¹ For general information on Astoria, see Benjamin Thompson, *History of Long Island from its Discovery and Settlement to the Present Time* (1918, reprint, Port Washington, N.Y., 1962), 538 ff; and "Astoria," by Vincent Seyfried, in the *Encyclopedia of New York City*.

² *History of Long Island*..., 569-570.

³ Ibid.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 2

Beginning in the 1830s, Stephen Halsey, a fur merchant, began developing the area that incorporated as a village in 1839,⁴ "...and at that time its name was changed from Hallett's Cove. The name originally proposed was the old Indian one of Sunswick, still kept alive in the name of a creek, but one of the men prominent in the matter of the incorporation, Mr. Stephen A. Halsey, suggested that if it were named in honor of John Jacob Astor he might pay for the foundation of a female seminary which was to be one of the features of the new village.... But Mr. Astor....threw cold water on the matter by saying there was already a city named Astoria and one was enough."⁵ Nevertheless, the name was changed, and eventually Astor made a modest contribution to the seminary.

Astoria developed both residential areas and industry. Several early mansions were built along 12th and 14th Streets by well-to-do New Yorkers, while the German United Cabinet Workers bought up farmlands and created a German-American enclave. In 1869 William Steinway bought a large tract of land for his piano manufacturing business and developed a small area of worker's housing for his employees. In 1870, "...[Newtown's] most densely populated corner, including Astoria, Ravenswood, Hunter's Point, was concentrated into one municipality and elevated into the dignity of a city [Long Island City]... Astoria, which became the Fourth Ward of the city, was long the most populous and most popular village within it."⁶

With the consolidation of Greater New York in 1898, Astoria became part of the new Borough of Queens. The 1890s and early 1900s saw a great increase in home-building. Perhaps the biggest impetus to the growth of Astoria in particular and Queens in general was the opening in 1909 of the Queensboro Bridge, at the southwestern corner of Astoria, connecting Queens with midtown Manhattan. The bridge was soon followed by the extension of the IRT subway into the borough during the late 1910s. Over the next two decades, the population of Queens mushroomed by 750%.⁷ The boom continued well into the 1920s.⁸ The 1920s and 1930s saw development of apartment buildings and housing projects in Astoria specifically as well as Queens in general.

Throughout the twentieth century, Astoria's population was generally multi-ethnic, with large populations of Italian- and Greek-Americans, but also smaller groups with origins in other countries. The Jewish population of Astoria began to grow significantly in the years following the First World War. The Jewish population of Astoria was part of the much larger Jewish population of New York City. Following a major wave of immigration from Eastern Europe, New York City became home to an enormous Eastern European Jewish immigrant community beginning in the 1880s and reaching its peak in the early decades of the twentieth century. From about 1880 up until World War I, some two million Jews (roughly one third of all the Jews in Europe) arrived in the United States.⁹ The vast majority first settled in New York City where they created an

⁴ Jeffrey A. Kroessler, *Building Queens: The Urbanization of New York's Largest Borough* (PhD dissertation, City University of New York, 1991), p. 23.

⁵ *History of Long Island...*, 569-570.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Kroessler, pp. iv, 333.

⁸ Kroessler, p. 378: "The economic boom of the 1920s...was nowhere more evident than in Queens, and like the rest of the boom, the real estate explosion in Queens was built on credit. The result was an extraordinary period of construction. In the five years between 1924 and 1929, the city issued 73, 656 permits for 1- and 2-family homes in Queens, providing housing for 93,000 families, or an estimated 400,000 persons."

⁹ Moses Rischin, *The Promised Land: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (New York, 1970), p.20.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 3

enormous Yiddish-speaking community. In this city within a city, Jewish immigrants were able to find kosher food, Yiddish-language newspapers and mutual aid societies. Major Jewish immigration to the Lower East Side stopped in 1924 with the passage of new immigration laws.

Though the city's Jewish population was enormous, the pre-World War I Jewish population of Queens was quite small. In 1913 (not quite a decade before the founding of the Astoria Center of Israel), New York City's Jewish population was estimated at 1,330,000. Of that number, only 23,000 lived in Queens.¹⁰ Synagogues played a major role in the life of New York's Jewish population. New York's 1918 Jewish population, estimated at between 1 and 1.5 million, was served by 700 synagogues. In that year, West Queens had just one synagogue, in one building, while East Queens (east of Flushing Avenue) had eighteen synagogues, only five of which had their own buildings. Following the War's end, the Jewish population began to grow, and the construction of synagogues followed.

The Astoria Center of Israel

The Astoria Center of Israel began as a proposal, from members of a local synagogue, Congregation Mishkan Israel (founded in the 1880s, cornerstone laid in 1906), for a *Talmud Torah* (Jewish religious school). The idea first took shape in 1921 when "Jewish families in large numbers were beginning to move into Astoria, and Mr. Meyer Weisberg, the president of the Mishkan Israel Congregation, saw the necessity for providing better facilities for teaching Jewish children the religion of their fathers."¹¹ Weisberg's untimely death delayed the project, but eventually the Astoria Talmud Torah Association was organized, on January 24, 1925, "for the purpose of building a Talmud Torah in Astoria." The association's first task was "...to interview every Jewish resident in Astoria and to obtain as many members as possible, which will serve as a test in the interest of the people in our community towards the need of a Talmud Torah."¹² The building was estimated to cost "approximately \$100,000.00." Though initially planned as a school, the association understood from the beginning that the building will of course be adaptable to incidental community uses, such as meeting halls, synagogue for Holy Days, etc."¹³ The association's initial assumption was that "the objective of our building is, primarily, a Hebrew School."¹⁴ The student population was to be largely the children of members of the Mishkan Israel congregation. A site was acquired directly next door to Mishkan Israel. (The original address of the Astoria Center was 820 Crescent Street, and of Mishkan Israel 826 Crescent Street). Before the year was out, the congregation had hired architect Louis Allen Abramson to design the new building.¹⁵

Initially, the association thought about "amalgamation" with the Long Island City Jewish Center,¹⁶ a similar organization, but when that plan fell through another emerged for amalgamation with the neighboring congregation of Mishkan Israel with the reason being that, "It was the unanimous consensus of the Board of Trustees that such an amalgamation should take place in order to eliminate friction, waste of money and energy

¹⁰ *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City 1917-1918* (New York: Kehillah [Jewish Community], 1918), p.86.

¹¹ "Our Beginnings - A Historical Retrospective," 75th Anniversary Journal, Astoria Center of Israel.

¹² Minutes of the Astoria Talmud Torah Association, January 24th, 1925; copy located in the office of the Astoria Center of Israel.

¹³ Minutes of the Astoria Talmud Torah Association, January 31, 1925.

¹⁴ Minutes of the Astoria Talmud Torah Association, March 28th, 1925.

¹⁵ Minutes of the Astoria Talmud Torah Association, December 31, 1925.

¹⁶ Minutes of the Astoria Talmud Torah Association, March 12th, 1925

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 4

and for the purpose of strengthening and solidifying the Jewish community in Astoria."¹⁷ The Center's cornerstone was laid in November of 1925, and the dedication took place in March of 1926.¹⁸ In the very first years of the Center's existence, the two neighboring institutions, the Astoria Center and Mishkan Israel, did co-exist and "Religious services were conducted at both places for a few years..... A number of congregants belonged to both synagogues. But despite this sentimental affection between these two increasingly separate organizations, by the time of that January 1927 meeting, there was no doubt that the Astoria Center of Israel had already emerged as the dynamic new source of Jewish life in Western Queens. By sometime in 1928...[prayer services] had all started to be conducted at the Center."¹⁹

Theological differences may have played a role in the separation of the two institutions. Mishkan Israel remained a traditionally Orthodox congregation. By contrast the Astoria Center's first rabbi was educated at the Jewish Institute for Religion, a Reform seminary founded by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, leader of the "Free Synagogue" movement that sponsored many changes unacceptable to Orthodox congregations. One of the speakers at the Center's cornerstone-laying ceremony was the rabbi of Manhattan's Temple Emanu-El, the city's preeminent Reform congregation.²⁰ The Center eventually affiliated with the Conservative movement, to which it belongs today. Congregation Mishkan Israel's building was destroyed by fire in 1981. By that time, the older congregation had shrunk to 65 members and no longer employed a rabbi.²¹

Though the Astoria Center of Israel functioned as a synagogue for almost its entire existence, from the beginning it also served broader goals. The synagogue's "President's Message" in its first year of operation expressed the purpose of the Center, citing the High Holiday religious services held in the building, and the school serving 150 children. The message also highlighted a variety of community uses:

Children have found a home in the Center for their social activities. The Center offers a clean Jewish environment and exercises a wholesome influence through its several clubs, such as the Boy Scout Troop, Young Judaeon Club, Young Folks' League, Girls' Club, and others... We are not building upon narrow and limited foundations. We strive to be broad and encompass the various phases of Jewish life and activities. If we work together, this Astoria Center of Israel, will yet prove to be a model Jewish institution for other communities to imitate.²²

The name, "Astoria Center of Israel," was specifically chosen for the purpose of permitting a wider scope of activities and encouraging the various ages and elements of the Community. The Center's original conception as a Hebrew school with facilities for other uses, to serve as an adjunct to the adjoining Mishkan Israel synagogue and its very name, "Astoria Center," linked it to the "Jewish Center" movement that was reaching its apogee in the years the Center was constructed.

¹⁷ Minutes of the Astoria Talmud Torah Association, October 5th, 1926.

¹⁸ *First Anniversary* booklet, "History of the Center," by Irving M. Hoffberg.

¹⁹ "Our Beginnings...."

²⁰ *New York Times*, November 23, 1925, p.24.

²¹ "Blaze Destroys a Synagogue," *New York Times*, March 18, 1981, p. B4.

²² *First Anniversary* booklet, "President's Message," Isaac Baer.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 5

New York Synagogues and the "Jewish Center" Phenomenon

The history of New York synagogues extends back to the construction in 1729 of the original "Shearith Israel" or Mill Street synagogue (no longer extant). In the intervening three centuries, synagogue architecture has gone through many forms as evidenced by surviving New York synagogues that included a number of distinct types, ranging from "stieblach," (store-front synagogues) and vernacular "tenement synagogues" of long narrow structures suited to the 100x20 foot lots typical of the Lower East Side (e.g. the Stanton Street Shul, NR listed in 2002) to the grand, high-style "cathedral" synagogues (e.g. the Central Synagogue, NR listed in 1970). The twentieth century saw the development of a new, particularly American synagogue type known as the Jewish Center that in addition to being a place of worship, served as a center of community life. Besides a sanctuary, it included classrooms, social halls and in the largest buildings, even gyms and swimming pools.

The development of the Jewish Center was been carefully chronicled by historian David Kaufman who traced the origin of the phenomenon to several sources that included the millennia-old tradition of the synagogue as a place of worship, study and assembly.²³ Other influences were the nineteenth century Protestant development of the "institutional church" and the social requirements of newly-developed communities of middle-class assimilated first- and second-generation Jewish families. One specific example of the form was the West Side Jewish Center built in 1917 on Manhattan's West 86th Street by the influential Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Kaplan has often been cited as the originator of the Jewish Center, but Kaufman argued that many of the necessary conditions were already in place, and that "Kaplan was simply the right man at the right time, giving audible voice to less immediately observable – but far more pervasive – historical processes."²⁴

Nevertheless, Kaplan's Jewish Center exemplified the type as it developed in the years following World War I and was without question an influential model for similar Jewish Centers constructed around the city in the following decades. As described by Kaufman, "The new institution would be neither a synagogue, nor a Jewish school, nor a social club like the YMHA, but rather, a combination of all three. The idea was one of unification and simplification, meant to harmonize dissonant elements in the cacophonous milieu of the contemporary Jewish community; as formulated by Kaplan it became the germination of the synagogue-center movement."²⁵ Kaplan described his conception of the Jewish Center in 1918:

We state frankly that we are establishing the Jewish Center for the purpose of deriving from it for ourselves pleasures of a social, intellectual, and spiritual character... The Jewish Center will be dominated by a purpose of far-reaching significance, if we, who are about to establish it, will do so with the deliberate and conscious aim of conducting it as an experiment to help us solve the problem of Jewish life and religion...²⁶ The elements which are indispensable to health in human life are four in number: atmosphere, light, food and exercise. Provide Jewish life with these constituents, and you will solve the problem of Judaism.²⁷

²³ David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History* (Brandeis University Press, 1999).

²⁴ Ibid, p.7.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 232-233.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 238.

²⁷ Ibid, 239.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 6

Kaplan saw the Jewish Center as meeting four different levels of need and described by Kaufman as:

... "atmosphere," or a Jewish environment; "light," interpreted as "entertainment and joy-giving recreations"; the "food" of Jewish knowledge; and "exercise," understood as the opportunity for practical action. In other words, the Kaplanian synagogue-center is intended to provide a spatial context for Jewishness, a recreational center, an institute for Jewish education (for all ages), and a headquarters for social and political activism... Created as a congregational entity and intended to revolve around a synagogal hub, the West Side Jewish Center was a synagogue-center and, as such, became the prototype for a new movement in American Jewish life.²⁸

The building erected in 1917 on West 86th Street was unlike any prior synagogue. As described in 1917, the eleven-story building was planned to include "...a spacious lobby and auditorium on the first floor with coat rooms and lavatories on the second floor. The synagogue extends through the third and fourth floors with the exception of the front of the building, where the fourth floor space is to be used as a library, room for trustees, and gallery. The additional stories that will be erected at some future time will contain the following: Fifth and sixth floors, gymnasium and exercise rooms; seventh and eighth floors, natatorium and baths, including steam and hot rooms, showers, &c. and sleeping rooms; ninth floor, class and club rooms for junior; tenth floor, club rooms and banquet hall, with necessary kitchen and pantries."²⁹

Kaplan's West Side Jewish Center was followed by a number of major such complexes in Brooklyn, including first and most famous, the Brooklyn Jewish Center built in the 1920s and 1930s, a major example of the type that continued being built into the 1940s and 1950s. The Astoria Center of Israel was smaller building than any of these and lacked a gymnasium and a swimming pool. Nevertheless, its name linked it to this phenomenon along with its goals of "social activities," origins as a school, and as community building with a synagogue space. It was also linked by its design through the architect, Louis Allen Abramson, who did of a number of the best known Jewish Center buildings.

Louis Allen Abramson³⁰

Louis Allen Abramson (1887-1985) had a long architectural career stretching from the turn-of-the-twentieth century through the late 1960s. Abramson began as an office boy and then a draftsman in the office of John Duncan where he helped design several neo-French Classic townhouses in midtown Manhattan. Leaving Duncan's office, he traveled to the west coast, working in and around Seattle for several years. Returning to New York, he established an independent architectural practice. Abramson was known for the design of hospitals, nursing homes and restaurants. His restaurants included Horn & Hardart Automats on West 33rd and West 181st Streets, six Longchamps restaurants in Manhattan, restaurants for the Brass Rail including the

²⁸ Kaufman explains that Kaplan's type of "Jewish Center" must be considered separately from a contemporaneous "secular" institution *also* known as a "Jewish Center," p. 240.

²⁹ "Jewish Social Centre," *New York Times*, March 10, 1918, p. RE12.

³⁰ Information about Abramson is based in part on a personal interview conducted by the author of this nomination in the late 1970s, as well as other sources cited below individually.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 7

outlets for the 1939 World's Fair and Ben Marden's Riviera night club/restaurant perched on the Palisades. These restaurants were elegant Art Deco and Art Moderne creations designed in the 1930s and 1940s. A great deal of Abramson's work was done for Jewish communal enterprises, including hospitals, senior centers, youth centers, and synagogues. His work prior to the 1930s tended to the Neo-Classical or Neo-Renaissance. Abramson greatly admired McKim, Mead & White's work, to which Duncan had introduced him. Abramson stated that he had great "...admiration of what they had done. And that never left me, never. Each time I'd go by the University Club on Fifth Avenue, I'd stand and figuratively bow, I did love that building. When they started to destroy the Penn Station I used to go over there and cry. To me it was perfection, perfection.... Penn Station was... I don't know how I can really say it. I felt meek in the presence of that building... I recall once, and I don't know if you will recall it, as you walk in from the Seventh Avenue side, where the bronze letters, tablets, on either side... the spacing of the letters themselves impressed me. It was done as a master would do it."³¹

Abramson's first independent work was the Young Women's Hebrew Association (YWHA) on Central Park North, just west of Fifth Avenue, built 1912-14. Before becoming its architect, Abramson functioned as its "campaign manager," organizing what became a huge fundraising operation supported by much of the organized Jewish community. The progress of the fundraising campaign was chronicled in a dozen articles in the *Times*. According to the *New York Times*, Abramson was "one of the most active workers in the cause."³² Some of the most famous names in New York finance and business contributed funds: financiers Jacob H. Schiff³³ and Felix Warburg; theatrical impresario Abraham Erlanger (of the Klaw & Erlanger organization), as well as members of the Guggenheim and Loeb families, and lawyer Louis Marshall, a major Jewish communal figure.³⁴ Prominent rabbis spoke on behalf of the project, including Dr. Stephen S. Wise of the Free Synagogue, Dr. Judah Magnes,³⁵ and Rabbi David De Sola Poole of Shearith Israel,³⁶ as well as Dr. Joseph Silverman, rabbi of Temple Emanu-El.

On completion of the building's construction, the YWHA contained "...dormitories, clubrooms, classrooms, where cooking, stenography, dressmaking, and hat trimming will be taught; a reading room and library, gymnasium and swimming pool, social parlors for the girl residents, and a synagogue on the ground floor."³⁷ In short, Abramson's first major building included all the functions of a typical Jewish Center. Years later, in reminiscing about the building, Abramson described its design: "The auditorium was Stanford White's Italian. That was the influence."³⁸

Abramson went on to design many Jewish communal institutions. In 1915, he designed the Neo-Renaissance Home of the Daughters of Jacob, a senior center in the Bronx, as well as buildings for Beth Israel hospital, United Israel Zion Hospital in Brooklyn, a Jewish Maternity Hospital on East Broadway and the Long Island

³¹ Interview by the author of this nomination; reprinted in "New York from Classic to Moderne: Local Architects Remember," a chapter in *Everyday Masterpieces* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), pp 211 ff.

³² "Debutantes to Help raise \$200,000 Fund," *New York Times*, April 5, 1912, p.7.

³³ "Y.W.H.A. Fund Half Won," *New York Times*, April 27, 1912, p.14.

³⁴ "Dedicate \$350,000 Home of Y.W.H.A.," *New York Times*, November 23, 1914, p.11.

³⁵ "New Start for Y.W.H.A.," *New York Times*, April 24, 1912, p.24.

³⁶ "Debutantes to Help raise \$200,000 Fund," *New York Times*, April 5, 1912, p.7.

³⁷ "Dedicate \$350,000 Home of Y.W.H.A.," *New York Times*, November 23, 1914, p.11.

³⁸ Interview by the author, *op. cit.*

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 8

Jewish Hospital. His work extended to public hospitals as well, notably the Bronx Hospital (1919) near Crotona Park. In 1917, Abramson won the commission for Mordecai Kaplan's West Side Jewish Center. Kaplan had been aware of Abramson's work at the YWHA, a similar building type.³⁹ Thus began Abramson's career as what Kaufman, the chronicler of the Jewish Center movement, calls "a leading architect of the synagogue-center building boom."⁴⁰

Kaplan's commission was followed by the Brooklyn Jewish Center of 1919, a direct offshoot of Kaplan's West Side center, and once called "the most well-known prototype of the synagogue center."⁴¹ According to contemporary press accounts (most likely based on material supplied by the architect), the "façade of this structure has been designed in a severe early Italian Renaissance style."⁴² Abramson also designed the Flatbush Jewish Center (1921), and may also have designed the East Midwood Jewish Center.⁴³

In 1925, when the Astoria Center of Israel was being planned as a Jewish Center, Abramson was the logical choice to be its architect. Like Abramson's first three Jewish Center commissions (the YWHA, Kaplan's Jewish Center, and the Brooklyn Jewish Center), the Astoria Center is Neo-Renaissance in its design, with the addition of Jewish symbols. As described in an article in *The American Jewish Yearbook* for 5687 (1926-1927), the Neo-Renaissance was a common style for synagogues designed during this period:

Many exotic styles of architecture have been employed in the attempt to achieve a distinctive type, – among them the Moorish, the Assyrian and the Egyptian, but these fortunately have generally been abandoned when they were found to be inelastic and unsuited to dissimilar climatic conditions and to different building materials. In going over the field of recent endeavor, it would seem that the styles selected by architects have narrowed down to only two – a free interpretation of the classic, or some form of the Byzantine.⁴⁴

The Astoria Center's building was a two-story façade of brick with cast-stone trim. It was symmetrically composed of five bays defined by double-height Ionic piers supporting an entablature and topped by a balustrade. Its round-arched entrance was topped with a cartouche (a classical detail) within which was inscribed the Jewish symbol of the *magen david*. Round-arched windows in each bay at the first story had leaded-glass sash, each with a *magen david* in the center of its upper sash. Inside, a small chapel had an imitation beamed ceiling and a pilastered ark with a broken pediment within which was set a representation of the two Tablets of the Law. Renaissance-inspired details in the main sanctuary included double-height round-arched windows set between fluted pilasters. The imitation marble ark of piers supported an architrave topped

³⁹ *Shul with a Pool*, p. 80. "In his journal entry for August 1914, Mordecai Kaplan lauded two female acquaintances 'for their painstaking efforts in helping to erect such a useful and wonderful edifice.'"

⁴⁰ *Shul with a Pool*, p. 80.

⁴¹ *Shul with a Pool*, p. 249.

⁴² "Jewish Social Centre," *New York Times*, March 10, 1918, p. RE12.

⁴³ Listed in the National Register. The NR nomination cites the Flatbush Jewish Center as Abramson's design, and makes the attribution of the East Midwood Center based on Abramson's experience with Jewish Centers in general and the Center's similarity to the Brooklyn Jewish Center. The nomination notes: "The one piece of written evidence regarding Louis Allen Abramson's role in East Midwood is a statement in the *Twentieth Anniversary of the Jewish Communal Center of Flatbush, 1916-1936 Souvenir Journal* that Abramson drew the plans for East Midwood."

⁴⁴ William G. Tachau, "The Architecture of the Synagogue," *American Jewish Yearbook* – 5687 [1926-27], pp. 191-2.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 9

by an elaborate broken pediment with (like the small ark in the chapel) a representation of the Tablets of the Law. Since it was built with the Orthodox congregation of neighboring Mishkan Israel in mind, the sanctuary included a women's balcony at the rear. In keeping with its function as a Center, the building included a social hall in the basement and classrooms in the second story.

Murals by Louis Rigal and Metalwork by Oscar Bach

One of the most unusual features of the synagogue was an early series of decorative murals commissioned in 1929 from French artist Louis Pierre Rigal (1889-1985), not originally part of Abramson's plan. Rigal studied at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* in Paris where in 1919 he won the prestigious *Prix de Rome*, which sent him to Rome to study painting for three years. In 1925 he exhibited at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, the famed exposition that eventually gave rise to the name "Art Deco." Rigal won several prestigious commissions at U.S. hotels, including the Palmer House in Chicago and the Waldorf-Astoria in New York.⁴⁵ At the Waldorf-Astoria, he painted murals on classical themes in the main foyer in 1931: "The guest who enters by the Park Avenue foyer may see, high on the gray stone walls of this interior, a series of thirteen paintings in soft colors by the French artist Louis Rigal. His classic scenes suggest hospitality."⁴⁶ Rigal returned to the Waldorf-Astoria in 1938 to design an enormous round rug, called the *Wheel of Life* for the foyer.⁴⁷ A complex mosaic reproducing the *Wheel of Life* was installed in the foyer floor in 1939.⁴⁸

Rigal also exhibited in New York galleries. As characterized in a review of one of his shows:

Rigal is a Parisian decorator, one-time Prix de Rome and winner of a Grand Prix at the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs, who, since his arrival in the United States has been honored with such important commissions as murals for the Telephone Building, the ceiling of Aeolian, and some of the walls in the new Waldorf-Astoria. He belongs, more or less, to that "International" group which comprises Konijnburg, Knopff, Klimt and a number of other painters throughout Europe. The colour is light and brilliant, and the stylization of figures extreme; long limbs, Leonardesque faces with slanting eyes and enigmatic smiles. Rigal is undoubtedly a competent craftsman and a skilled decorator, we should like to see him try his hand at "commercial art." His style has something in common with both Erte' and Dupas.⁴⁹

Rigal's work at the Astoria Center consisted of murals applied to the foyer's ceiling, the sanctuary's ceiling, the front of the balcony, and the walls flanking and behind the ark. Figurative painting in synagogues was relatively rare because a common reading of the second of the Ten Commandments suggests that it forbids such representation. Figurative painting in synagogues, however, existed at least since the third century of the common era when the synagogue of Dura Europos (in what today is Syria) was adorned with elaborate pictorial

⁴⁵ Mary Lackritz Gray, *A Guide to Chicago's Murals* (University Of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ "Hotel Decoration in the Grand Manner," *New York Times*, September 27, 1931, p. SM8.

⁴⁷ "Huge Carpet Finished," *New York Times*, April 9, 1938, p. 19.

⁴⁸ "Mosaic Depicts Life," *New York Times*, May 14, 1939, p. 156.

⁴⁹ "Current Exhibitions of Interest," *Parnassus* (published by the College Art Association), Vol. 2, No. 4 (Apr., 1930), pp. 3-7.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 10

representations of biblical stories.⁵⁰ Late medieval Eastern European examples of figural representations included murals in the Isaac synagogue in the Kazimierz section of Krakow (1640) showing animals and views of Hebron, Jerusalem and Machpelah. Many synagogues in Eastern Europe had similar decoration. Figurative decoration also found its way into German synagogues of the eighteenth century, though these tended to avoid human figures and focus on floral and animal life.⁵¹ Still, such examples represented a decided minority in Europe and similarly in the American synagogues of European Jewish immigrants. This made the murals at the Astoria Center unusual as examples of pictorial representation in an American synagogue.

As described in the synagogue's newsletter:

Decorations

The Synagogue and the lobby of the Center were decorated during the summer by Mr. Pierre Louis Rigal [sic] of France. He was assisted by a number of capable artists. We are sure that the public will be interested in the artist and it is our pleasure to give out the following information. Mr. Rigal was born in Montpellier, France. He went to Paris to study art in 1912. During the war he was an artillery officer in the French army and was wounded in Verdun and Monartim.

In 1919, Mr. Rigal was awarded the Prix de Rome, the most coveted prize in the world of art. During the great international exposition of Decorative Arts in Paris, Mr. Rigal was awarded the Grand Prix des Arts Decoratifs. The French Government honored him in 1928 by making him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor.

Some of his important works include wood sculptures for the Lord Rothermere House, Paris; the decoration of Palmer House, Chicago; the boudoir for Phipps, Miami; ceiling panel of the Aeolian Hall, New York; exhibition room of the Renault autos, New York; mural panels in the lobby of the Lincoln Hotel and Chanin Building and numerous portraits in Europe and America.

The decorations in the Synagogue have evoked the admiration of many architects and artists who were surprised at the ingenuity of the designs, the color scheme and the expert use of Jewish symbolism. Connoisseurs of decorative art were profuse in their compliments at the ability of the artist to bring out in paint such a rich scheme in spite of the absence of an architectural background.

We may state without hesitation that there is no synagogue in Greater New York to rival ours from the point of view of artistic decoration. We are justly proud of the fact that the Center is leading older American Institutions in emulating the old world synagogue decorations.

The newsletter also described the metalwork by Oscar Bach:

⁵⁰ For the entire question of representative art in the Jewish world, from antiquity to modern times, see *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History*, edited by Cecil Roth (McGraw-Hill, 1961).

⁵¹ See Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe* (MIT Press, 1985), pp. 56 ff.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 11

The chandeliers were specially designed and executed by the Oscar Bach Studios of New York. Mr. Oscar B. Bach, one of the greatest craftsmen in metal in America designed them personally in honor of Mr. Rigal whose work he holds in great esteem.

The glass panels in the main doors leading to the Synagogue were designed by Mr. Rigal and executed by the Eno Art Co. of New York.

The work was under the constant supervision of the Chairman of the House Committee, Mr. Jacob Klein, who gave unstintingly of his time throughout the summer. He was at all times assisted by Mr. Isidore Weisberg. Both deserve the thanks, not only of the members but also of all who come within the portals of the Center to enjoy the beautiful atmosphere created by the unrivalled artistic decoration.⁵²

Rigal's work in the foyer was the ceiling painting, an elaborate symmetrical design based on curving stylized floral patterns. In the sanctuary, his work was done in four locations: on the ceiling, on the front wall around the arched opening beyond which sat the ark, in the bands outlining the triple arched frames of the windows behind the ark and on the front of the balcony. The theme of the paintings was suggested to Rigal by Rabbi Goldberg, who chose one biblical source and one Talmudic source: 1) the dove and the olive branch from the Noah story in Genesis, and 2) a well-known aphorism from the Talmudic tractate *Pirkei Avot* ("Chapters of the Fathers"), a collection of sayings and moral instruction from the early rabbis: "Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion, to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven."⁵³

On the front wall around the arched opening, the left side (facing the wall) depicted a lion and a deer rearing up on their hind legs facing each other, while the right side depicted a leopard and an eagle in a similar position. Below either set of figures was a painted base with olive clusters and branches surrounding a stylized *magen david*. Above either set of figures, a stylized pattern of branches and olives rose on either side to meet at the apex of the arch in the figure of a dove. On the band framing the triple-arched windows behind the ark, the paintings were simply decorative forms. The paintings on the front of the balcony combined stylized olive clusters and branches with a centrally placed *menorah*. The ceiling was divided into fifteen enormous square panels, in which several different murals repeated. Some were plain with a border of geometric patterns and curlicues. A similar pattern decorated a band that ran along the rear walls just where it met the ceiling while others had elaborate symmetrical patterns based on floral forms and still others repeated the paired figures of lion/deer and leopard/eagle, forming an "X" with interstices filled with olive branches.

The sanctuary's central chandelier by Oscar Bach was an elaborate ornamental design including floral patterns. The chandeliers by Oscar Bach represented the work of, in the words of the journal *Iron Age*, "probably the foremost metal craftsman of this country."⁵⁴ Born and trained in Germany, Oscar Bach (1884-1957) came to the United States in 1912, leaving behind a major European practice that included an ornamental metal Bible cover encrusted with jewels for the study of Pope Leo XIII. Several writers in the 1920s described Bach as a Renaissance "artist-artisan...a man who was in turn painter, sculptor, engraver,

⁵² *The Astoria Center of Israel Weekly*, October 25, 1929, Vol. IV, No. 6, p. 3.

⁵³ 75th Anniversary Journal.

⁵⁴ T.W. Lippert, "Colored Stainless Steel," *The Iron Age*, April 6, 1939, p.39.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 12

designer, craftsman." One writer, Matlack Price, wrote, "In Renaissance Italy they would have called him *maestro*."⁵⁵

Bach made the introduction of color into metal ornament something of a personal trademark. During the 1920s, he introduced color into his metal ornament by adding copper, silver or gold relief, bronze highlights and sometimes even colored enamel. In the 1930s, he developed the Bachite method for infusing steel with color. Bach also did work in New York City in the Empire State Building and the Department of Health headquarters at 125 Worth Street. He also designed the elaborate multi-color metal doors for the ark of the new synagogue built on the Upper West Side for Rodeph Sholom.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Many of the original members and founders of the Astoria Center of Israel were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who had become well-established in their new country. Isaac Baer, the Center's first president, led the planning of the Center after Weisberg's death. Baer immigrated to New York from Romania in the 1880s and became a successful builder, making him a logical choice to shepherd the Astoria Center building project:

Isaac Baer is a builder by character and inclination. An immigrant, arriving in America some forty years ago from Roumania, he becomes the chief instrument in the creation of a Jewish Center for the spreading of Jewish ideals in the new country. Thus a Jew answers the disgrace of his Fatherland [a reference to anti-Semitic restrictions and attacks in late nineteenth-century Romania]... He is a self-made man in the true meaning of the word. During the past ten years, he has been active in the building industry, and, together with his associates, has constructed many large apartment houses, loft buildings, and hotels.... As the president of the Weisberg-Baer Company of Astoria, one of the largest woodworking plants in the city, he employs some three hundred men, many of them residents of Astoria and members of the Center.... In February of this year, he was made the Honorary President for life of the congregation....⁵⁷

Another early president of the Center, Gustave Steiner, was born in Bohemia (present-day Czech Republic).⁵⁸ Jacob Klein, one of the Center's founders, was born in Austria. He ran the J. Klein Iron Works, Inc. in Long Island City.⁵⁹ Other early members, however, were born in New York: Dr. David Eisenberg, a president of the Center, was a Long Island City doctor⁶⁰, as was Dr. Jacob N. Feinberg.⁶¹ A synagogue trustee, David Kusnetz, was a New York State Supreme Court Justice.⁶²

⁵⁵ Matlack Price, *Design and Craftsmanship in Metals: the Creative Art of Oscar Bach* (1928) p.2.

⁵⁶ "The Metal Work in the Temple Rodeph Sholom," *Metal Arts* (April 1930), v. 3, p. 152-154.

⁵⁷ Astoria Center of Israel, *First Anniversary* booklet.

⁵⁸ Obituary, *New York Times*, April 10, 1932, p. N5.

⁵⁹ Obituary, *New York Times*, October 7, 1943, p. 23.

⁶⁰ Obituary, *New York Times*, September 20, 1950, p.31.

⁶¹ Obituary, *New York Times*, February 11, 1943, p.19.

⁶² Obituary, *New York Times*, June 29, 1949, p.29.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 13

The congregation's first and long-time rabbi, Rabbi Joshua Goldberg, was born in Belarus, and immigrated to the U.S. during World War I, at which time he joined the U.S. Army and served in Europe. After the War, Goldberg studied at the Jewish Institute of Religion and became the Astoria Center's rabbi in 1926. Rabbi Goldberg retained his association with the U.S. military, and in 1942 took a leave of absence from the Center to become the country's first rabbi to be commissioned as a Navy chaplain. In 1951 he became the first rabbi to be named chaplain of an entire Navy district, attaining the rank of captain in the Third Naval District. By then he had become "rabbi emeritus" of the Center.⁶³ Devotion to public service marked the career of a later Center rabbi as well: Rabbi Alvin Kass had been an Air Force chaplain before taking the pulpit at the Center; he became a reserve chaplain on assuming his new duties, and in 1966 also became a chaplain of the city's Police Department.⁶⁴

The Jewish population of Queens has grown enormously since the early part of the twentieth century, but during the past several decades the Jewish population of Astoria has declined. While there were once half-a-dozen synagogues in the neighborhood, many have disappeared, including Congregation Beth Jacob at 22-51 29th Street, Congregation Beth-El of Astoria, Congregation Adath Israel at 36-02 14th Street, and Congregation B'nai Israel at 45-11 21st Street, as well as Congregation Mishkan Israel, the Astoria Center's former neighbor. Local Jewish residents recall Astoria as once having a thriving Jewish community, with kosher bakeries and butcher shops on 30th Avenue and Steinway Street, now largely vanished.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the Astoria Center of Israel remains a vibrant congregation. A profile in the *New York Daily News* published in 2007, the congregation counted 100 members and offered the following bullet-list:⁶⁶

Most prized possession: The murals in our sanctuary by award-winning artist Louis Pierre Rigal, who was inspired by the writings of the Pirkei Avot (Ethics of The Fathers)....

Biggest wish-list item: As the Astoria populace is growing, we hope that it will bring new people in our midst so we can continue to maintain the level of Jewish life and communal service of those who came before us....

Proudest moment: Reaching 80 years and celebrating the milestones in our congregants' lives....

Most memorable wedding or other service: High Holy Day services, which are enhanced by a professional choir led and arranged by composer Steven Mayers and our cantor, George Lindenblatt...

Most dedicated volunteer: Each and every one of our volunteers are dedicated to the well-being of the temple...

⁶³ "Elevated to Chaplain of Third Naval District," *New York Times*, August 6, 1949, p.8; obituary, *New York Times*, December 26, 1994, p. 46.

⁶⁴ Kass obituary, *New York Times*, December 17, 1966, p.27.

⁶⁵ Jeff Gottlieb, President of the Queens Jewish Historical Society, who supplied the list of synagogues cited above, interviewed two long-time Astoria residents. Esther Fisher (interviewed March 3rd, 2002), a resident in the Queensview Houses, had lived in Astoria since age 14; she recalled the Jewish-owned business on Steinway Street, 30th Avenue and Broadway, and how crowded the many synagogues were on the High Holy Days. Martin Weinstein (interviewed September 18, 2003) lived at 29-06 Crescent Street and joined Mishkan Israel in 1956. He also recalled the kosher bakeries and butchers of the neighborhood.

⁶⁶ "Faith In The City. Visiting Our Communities Of Belief. Astoria Center Of Israel," *New York Daily News*, October 21, 2007, p. 37.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 14

High-profile congregants past and present: Too many to narrow down to just one...

Biggest issue: Getting landmark status...

The Astoria Center of Israel reflects the history of Jews in Queens in the twentieth century including the history of the Jewish Center movement and now also the history of Queens Jews at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its handsome neo-Renaissance design by Louis Allen Abramson and its unusual murals by Louis Rigal, make it an important architectural and artistic resource. The Astoria Center remains a vital part of the living history of its neighborhood, and of its city, and is intent on being part of the neighborhoods' future.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 9 Page 1

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"Blaze Destroys a Synagogue," March 18, 1981, p. B4.

"Debutantes to Help raise \$200,000 Fund," April 5, 1912, p.7.

"Dedicate \$350,000 Home of Y.W.H.A.," November 23, 1914, p.11.

"Elevated to Chaplain of Third Naval District," August 6, 1949, p.8.

"Hotel Decoration in the Grand Manner," September 27, 1931, p. SM8.

"Huge Carpet Finished," April 9, 1938, p. 19.

"Jewish Social Centre," March 10, 1918, p. RE12.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 9 Page 2

"Mosaic Depicts Life," May 14, 1939, p. 156.
"New Start for Y.W.H.A.," April 24, 1912, p.24.
"Would Curb the Flapper," November 23, 1925, p.24.
"Y.W.H.A. Fund Half Won," April 27, 1912, p.14.
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Obituary [Jacob N. Feinberg]. February 11, 1943, p.19
Obituary [Joshua Goldberg]. December 26, 1994, p. 46.

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Astoria Center of Israel
Name of Property

Queens County, New York
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

1 18 590792 4513702
Zone Easting Northing

2 18
Zone Easting Northing

3 18
Zone Easting Northing

4 18
Zone Easting Northing

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Virginia L. Bartos, Ph.D., Historic Preservation Program Analyst
organization NYS Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation date 17 June 2009
street & number PO Box 189 telephone 518-237-8643
city or town Waterford state NY zip code 12188-0189

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and **white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name/title Astoria Center of Israel
street & number 27-35 Cresecent St telephone (718) 278-2680
city or town Long Island City state NY zip code 11102

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 10 Page 1

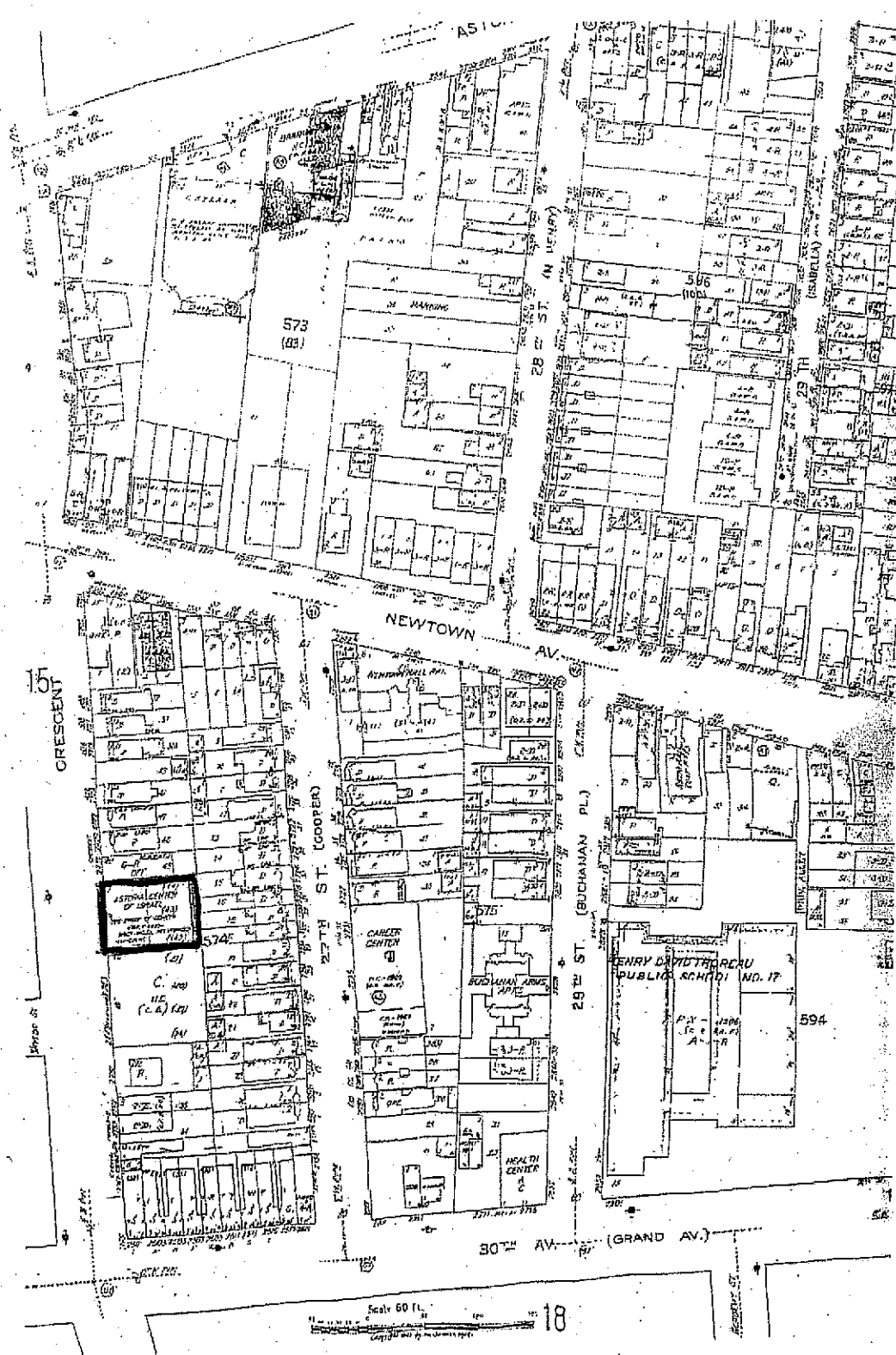
VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The Astoria Center of Israel property is a rectangular shaped lot of 7500 square feet near on the east side of Crescent Street nearly opposite the 29th Avenue cross street as illustrated on the attached map. The lot is designated at Block 572, Lot 42 in the Borough of Queens.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

Property boundary is the same as during the period of significance.

North



Astoria Center of Israel

27-35 Crescent Street

Queens County, NY

Source: The Sanborn Building & Property Atlas of Queens, New York. Volume 2, Plate 16.

First American Real Estate Solutions, 2006. Scale: 60 feet to 1 inch.

NR Boundary: —

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 11 Page 1

Description (section 7), Statement of Significance (Section 8), Bibliography prepared by:

Anthony W. Robins
Thompson & Columbus, Inc.
50 West 67th Street, Suite 1-F
New York, New York 10023
Phone: 212-877-7637
Fax: 212-877-9751
trob@pipeline.com

Astoria Center of Israel
Queens County, New York

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number Page 1 PHOTOGRAPH LIST

**Astoria Center of Israel (Queens) 27-35 Crescent Street
Astoria NY 11102**

Digital Images taken by Anthony W. Robins, February 2009.

Copies of images on disk are on file in the offices of the Field Services Bureau of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Peebles Island State Park, Waterford, New York.

Photo #1: Main façade of synagogue, view looking south from Crescent St.

Photo #2: Detail view of entrance in main façade.

Photo #3: Interior view of chapel.

Photo #4: Detail view of chapel window.

Photo #5: Interior view of foyer.

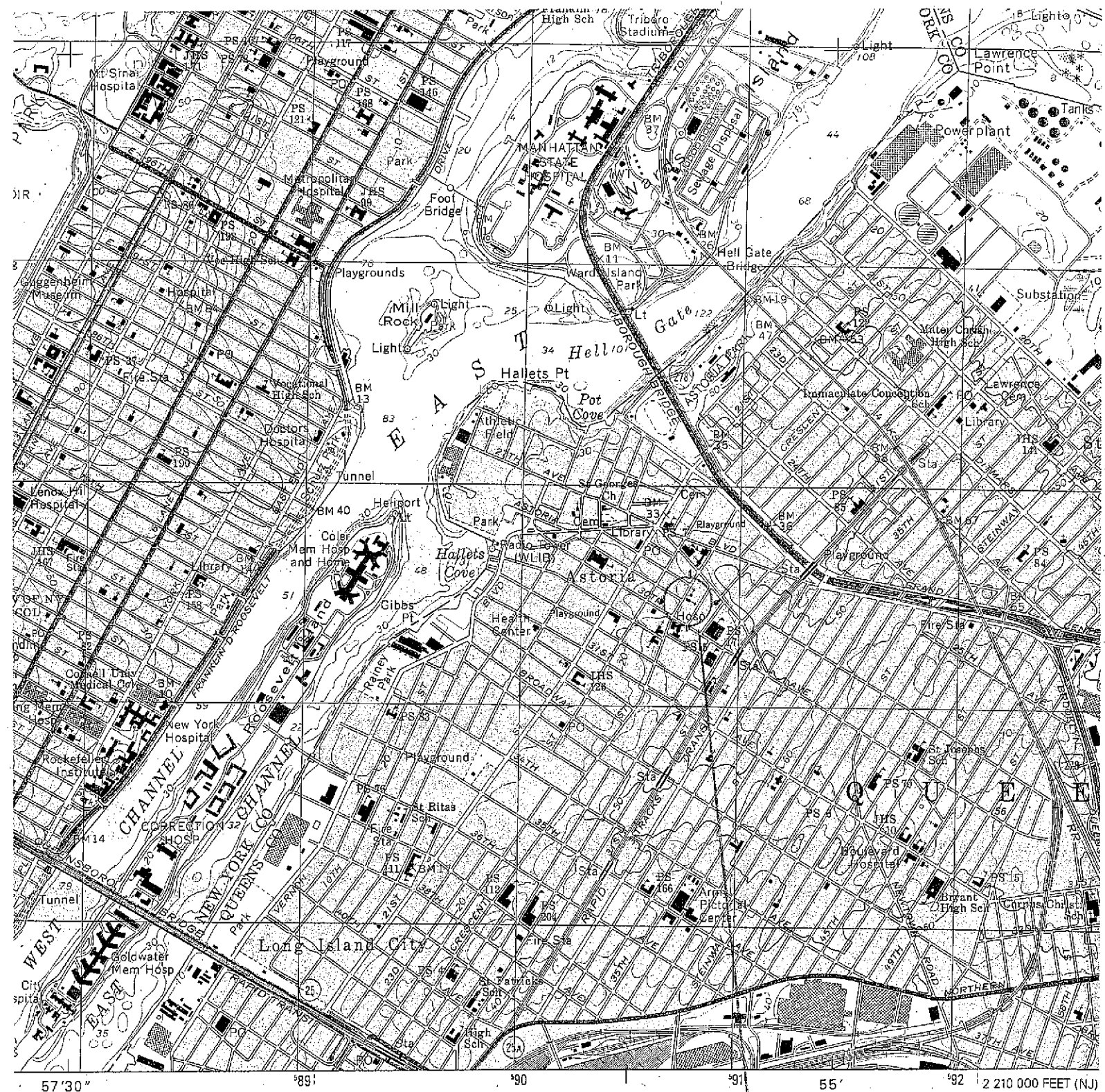
Photo #6: Interior view of worship space, looking toward the Ark.

Photo #7: Interior view of worship space, looking toward balcony.

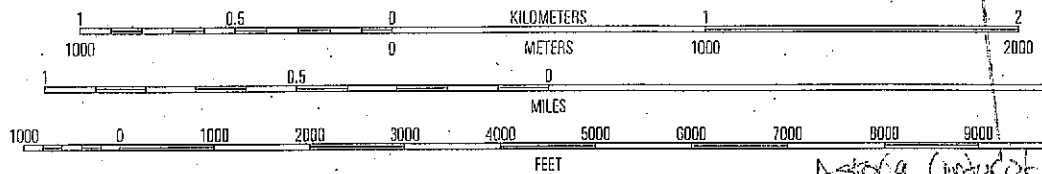
Photo #8: Detail view of windows in worship space.

Photo #9: Detail view of ceiling in worship space.

Photo # 10: Mural decoration, worship space ceiling.



SCALE 1:24 000



QUADRANGLE LOCATION

CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET
 NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929
 TO CONVERT FROM FEET TO METERS, MULTIPLY BY 0.3048
 DEPTH CURVES AND SOUNDINGS IN FEET, DATUM IS MEAN LOWER LOW WATER
 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO DATUMS IS VARIABLE
 THE MEAN RANGE OF TIDE IS APPROXIMATELY
 4 FEET IN THE HUDSON RIVER AND 5.7 FEET IN THE EAST RIVER

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
 FOR SALE BY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, P.O. BOX 25286, DENVER, COLORADO 80225
 A FOLDER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

Astoria (Center of Israel)
Astoria, Queens, New York
Central Park NY-NJ Quad
UTM Reference!
R/590742E/4515702N

1	2	3
4		5
6	7	8

ADJOINING 7.5' QUADRANGLE NAMES





