



Interactive WBT Sanctuary Tour "Script"

Led by WBT Educators

Review and adapt for the grade of your students

BEGIN ON BALCONY

Introduction to the Temple

This is the sanctuary of the Wilshire Blvd Temple, the oldest congregation in Los Angeles. This congregation was first created in 1862 by pioneer Jews who came to the United States from Poland and Germany to start a new life in California and the Wild West. Back then it was called Congregation B'nei B'rith. This was a few years before Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States! This building is actually the third one built by the members of the Temple. It was built in 1929! Its name was changed to Wilshire Boulevard Temple in 1937.

When this Temple built, this part of Los Angeles was where many Jewish families lived. Over time much of the Jewish community moved West towards the ocean, but L.A. is a city that is always changing and growing. Now more Jewish families are moving back to this part of L.A. and Wilshire Boulevard Temple is undergoing a huge renovation to welcome more and more families to our growing community here. During the past few years, this Sanctuary you are in underwent a huge renovation to fix, clean and renew this historic building that over time was falling



apart. This is a building over 80 years old; during the renovation everything in this space was repaired and improved for modern times.

- **Feel the seats**, you're sitting on--every seat was taken out and cleaned and cushions repaired.
- These **chandelier lamps** were taken down, brought to a workshop where they were taken apart and cleaned and fixed and reconnected.
- Look at the **oculus** which is at the center of the domed ceiling. The round top of the dome was repainted and refreshed with new gold leaf to and new light was put in.
- The glass in the **Rose Window** behind us was actually removed and taken apart piece by tiny piece. Each piece of glass was cleaned, fixed and reassembled at a stained glass studio in L.A.
- Behind that screen over the Bima is a **giant organ** --one of the best in L.A! Every piece of pipe—4000 in all--were taken apart, loaded on 34 trucks and hauled to a special studio in Ohio for repair. Then they were hauled back here for each part to be reassembled.
- There are **structural things** improved as well: the heating and cooling in the walls and the floors, the lighting, and the handicapped access to the Bima.
- And then there are the **murals**-- this work of art, which tells the story of the Jewish people, from the Biblical story of Creation to the hand of liberty



welcoming Jews to America, had layers of dirt cleaned off. Professional art restorers returned it to its original brightness and beauty.

Today we are going to explore a little bit about the architecture of this Sanctuary and then focus on the unique murals which surround us. We are going to talk a little bit up here--with the great view--and then go downstairs to explore the story in the murals.

Creating a Jewish Space

Let's take a minute to look around. Look up, down, and to all sides you can see around...**How does this building make you feel?** -Collect words for students' emotions .

Architect's know that the way a building is designed and built create particular feelings and emotions. What aspects of the space make you feel this way?

Is there a specific way to build a Synagogue?

NO-- Jews can come together to pray in any space. But there needs to be a few items available--what are they? **Torah, Bima and Ark – and a minyan—meaning 10 people.** As this is a Reform temple—both men and women can count towards the ten.

This building's architectural style is called **neo (new) Byzantine**. What does it have to have to make it Byzantine? --**the dome—and Romanesque arches which are rounded (instead of pointed) arches.**



When this building was being designed the New-Byzantine style was chosen because the architects felt it was similar to synagogues being excavated in Israel at that time. Also it was possible to have a big central space, where more seats could be closer to the Bima during services. However, this type of neo-Byzantine Architecture is not specifically Jewish. By the way, the lead architect A.M. Edelman was a Temple member and son of the first Rabbi to serve in Los Angeles.

How was this building made into a Jewish space?

Ask students look around to point out the Jewish references.

- Look up at the oculus and dome--what is written there? Can you make out the Hebrew word which surrounds the blue and shines down upon us? Rabbi Magnin made sure the word *Shema Yisrael*, "Hear O Israel" was written above.
- Look out at the hanging lamps. What Jewish ritual item do they look like? These lamps were called Spice Box Chandeliers as they resembled the spice boxes from Eastern Europe where spices were contained and smelled during *Havdalah* at the end of Shabbat
- Synagogues are also designed depending on the type congregation. This is a Reform Congregation not an Orthodox one. As some of you know in Orthodox Synagogues men and women sit separately—in the past, women



would often sit in the balcony. But in this Temple men and women always sat together.

- Let's look at the Murals---Everyone come to edge of the railing. Look around at the murals.

Show murals from the Balcony—Let's all come to the balcony and look out.

- This building was also made into a Jewish space through these unique murals. **This is the only synagogue being used today that has murals that show people and specific scenes of Jewish history.**
- WBT had many members who worked in the movie industry. In 1929 Los Angeles was the center of the motion picture industry. Almost all the items in this Sanctuary were donated by the heads of movie studios. The Warner Brothers donated the funds for the mural, as well as the services of their artist and set designer, Hugo Ballin to paint the murals. Ballin had a big studio close to the ocean, where he painted these on giant canvases. When complete they were attached to the walls here.

Now let's go downstairs and discover more about the murals.

Sit in the front of the Sanctuary ask everyone to look around at the murals.

Why the Murals Were Created

- In 1929 when this Temple was built, movies were just becoming popular. Rabbi Magnin, the Temple's rabbi was aware that powerful images—like those on a movie screen—could influence and inspire people. As so many



Temple members were connected to Hollywood, and as the times were changing, he wanted to take a leap and take the Temple in a new, more modern direction.

Think about other synagogues you have been in. Have you seen paintings of people?

It is very rare to see this because of the Second Commandment: “***Thou Shalt not make graven images. Do not have idols in the place where you worship.***”

This Jewish law from Biblical times has been interpreted in many ways in different times and places, but it generally has been taken to mean avoid placing figurative—or human—images in a synagogue.

However, in the 1920's archaeologists excavated ancient synagogues in Israel and the Middle East and noted that surprisingly they were decorated with images of people, as well as animals, plants and more. This showed that there was indeed a Jewish tradition of figurative art in synagogues. There was also a rich tradition in Poland of painting wooden synagogues--not with people--but with animals and symbols and plants.

So why did Rabbi Magnin take the leap to feature these figurative murals at Wilshire Boulevard Temple? As Rabbi Magnin was planning the synagogue design he said,

- “The day is over when Jews are likely to worship images and paintings. “Seeing our history in painted form, activates the imagination and creates curiosity for deeper knowledge of our own Jewish traditions.”

AND



- “In the past when Jews knew their own history and lived traditional Jewish lives--there was not a need for Jews to see illustrations of Jewish life! But In these times, when Jews are less religious, and with Hollywood movies, comic strip heroes and television more popular-- **visual imagery** would be an effective way to teach about Jewish life, and uplift the spirit! “

Magnin decided to line the sanctuary with these murals **which tell the story of the Jewish people—as a “learning tool” about the Jewish people and their shared stories and traditions**—a history Jews share whether we are from Israel or America or any other place in the world.

Now let’s take some time to look closely at the murals.

Discovering the Murals Student - Directed Interpretation

Note: In this activity, students are given the opportunity to explore the murals independently in small groups, and teach each other the chapters of Jewish history the mural depicts. Using self-guiding interpretive materials, students:

1. walk through the sanctuary and collectively determine and record what they recognize and know;
2. come together in their groups and select one section of the mural which they visually analyze;
3. read the description of their mural section on the back of the image to confirm the content;
4. take turns standing in front of the group to teach each other what their section of the mural depicts.

MATERIALS NEEDED PER GROUP

- **One 11” x 17” cardboard clipboard and clip**
- **One pencil**
- **One set of 11 x 17” laminated images of the murals (for the class)**
- Two sided 11 x 17” “Murals Storyboard” with thumbnail images of the mural panels (downloaded from website and copied.)
- One 11 x 17” “Image Analysis Sheet” (downloaded from website and copied.)

Items in bold are stored at the Temple. Please discuss with the WBT Tour Office in advance to arrange access. All consumable templates can be downloaded on the Interpretive Materials tab of this website.



ACTIVITY

Divide students in groups of four. Each group gets an 11 x 17" cardboard clipboard and the printed two sided "Murals Story Board" (on front and back), attached with a clip, and a small golf pencil.

Explain to students that they will be walking around the Sanctuary in their groups, looking at each section of the mural represented by a thumbnail image on the board. As they look at each image they should write down what they recognize, and what they think is going on in that chapter of Jewish history:

- Who are the people in the mural?
- What scenes from our history are you familiar with?
- What Jewish traditions, rituals or stories do you recognize?

Take 15-20 minutes walking around in groups then come together in front.

While the students are walking around, place the 11 x 17" laminated images of details of the mural on the floor in front of the Sanctuary. Ask each group to select one image that interests them.

Find places for the students to sit in the front of the Sanctuary. Provide each group with an "Image Analysis Chart" (use the cardboard clipboard as a writing surface), and ask them to use the questions on the chart to analyze the image and record their observations.

AFTER completing the chart, they can read the description on the back.

Ask each group to come in front of the class to share what's going on in their picture, as well as one feature from the image analysis chart that interested them as a group. Ask the group to designate one speaker to present

In conclusion:

After each group shares, ask them what was surprising to them about the murals now that they know more about them.

Discuss that the images selected for the mural in 1929 were the decision and choices of Rabbi Magnin and artist Hugo Ballin; it is by no means a complete depiction of Jewish history. **Are there stories or chapters throughout Jewish history they would have included or omitted?**

Importantly, these murals were painted in 1929 before significant historical events that impacted the world, and the Jewish people in particular. **What events are missing from these murals? (Notably, mass immigration to America from Eastern Europe in the 1880's, World War 2, the establishment of the State of Israel) What would additional panels look like if the mural was continued to the present time?**

If time permits, students can work on an art project created a collaborative collage creating sections of the mural from 1929 onward.



