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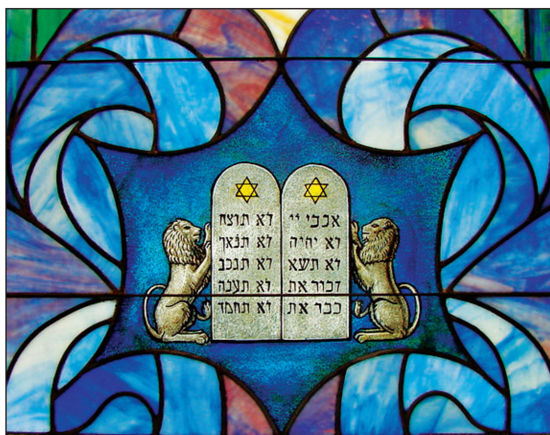
Commandments appeared to eclipse even the Ark itself.

Eventually, the congregation received an answer to its inquiry: "There [is] nothing in the laws [rabbinic law] which prescribes any particular form; consequently that it is not against the *din* to have them fixed as they are at present." The response did acknowledge that Anshi Chesed's Ten Commandments were, "as a general thing, fixed differently." And there the matter rested.

But not for long. Uneasiness about the window lingered. About a year later, some members agitated again for its removal. In short order the synagogue's leaders reinstated the "Committee on the *Aseres Hadebros*"—but now directed its members to "get tablets made and to have the [Ten Commandments] inscribed therein as it is more appropriate to have them fixed." To satisfy those congregants who liked the circular commandments, the original window would stay put; and to satisfy everyone else, a traditional twin-topped Ten Commandments constructed in Italian marble would be placed atop the Ark.

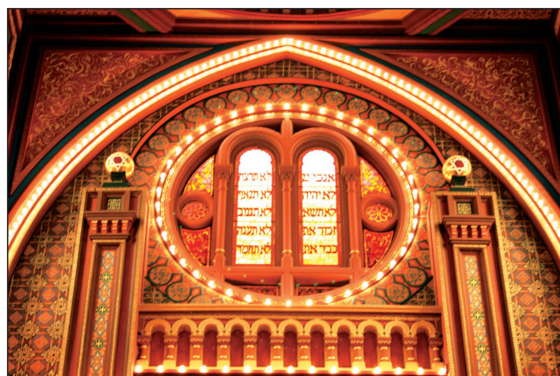
And so the window remained, untouched, well into the 1970s, when vandals made off with it, leaving a series of gaping holes where once the commandments reigned supreme.



WINDOW, TEMPLE ISRAEL OF LONDON, ONTARIO.

It's tempting to read this tale of congregational dissension as yet another in a very long line of Jewish historical moments in which the forces of conservatism, be they aesthetic or procedural, did battle against the forces of change. But the historical reality is far more complex. Though proponents of the round-topped, twin tablets version advocated "fixing" the commandments in the "usual way," nothing was "fixed" or "usual" about them from a Jewish perspective.

On the contrary. The twin-topped configuration was a "medieval Christian invention that gradually spread through western Christendom," explains the renowned art historian Ruth Mellinkoff. The older Christian conventions, some stretching as far back as Byzantine times, had pictured the Ten Commandments as a scroll, a book, or a set of square-topped tablets. By the 19th century, the twin-topped version had entered America's visual universe: altarpieces and stained-glass windows, illustrated prayer books, Sunday school primers, clocks, watch fobs, and bookmarks, as well as domestic broadsides and posters festooned with flowers and laurel leaves. Transcending its Christian associations, picturing the commandments thus became an American practice.


WINDOW, PLUM STREET TEMPLE, CINCINNATI.

Historically, the Jews had a very different relationship to the Ten Commandments. While the Decalogue could not be ignored, given the covenantal relationship among God, Moses, and the Jewish people, other elements in Jewish liturgical and visual culture—the *Sh'ma,* say, or the menorah—were far more widely publicized. And even when depictions of the Decalogue did appear, in stone, wood, and fabric, adorning an *Aron Kodesh* (Ark) or a Torah mantle, they did not stand on their own as autonomous images; instead, they were bound, quite literally, to a ritual object. Their function was not so much decorative as heraldic.

The Ten Commandments window at Congregation Anshi Chesed stood all that on its head: It was big, bold, round, fashioned out of glass, and purely ornamental.

Most notably, it was also one of the few religious symbols Jews and Christians held in common.

In the modern era, social and cultural exchanges between Christians and Jews had become more frequent. And so, when the prospect of finding common ground was increasingly touted as a social good, how better to usher in a new order of comity than by harnessing the symbolic power of the Ten Commandments?

When seen from this angle, Anshi Chesed's disquiet over the Ten Commandments was, at bottom, an exercise in the presentation of a modern Judaism—a modern Jewish polity whose intended audience was as much the greater public as its own members. At stake was the relationship of the Jews to the modern world. Would they retain their distinctiveness, as of old, or seek out common bonds? Making their way between two iterations of the Ten Commandments, one whose more traditional form highlighted its consonance with America, and another whose unusual configuration signaled its departure from it, the congregants of the Norfolk Street synagogue faced a Hobson's choice: between courting distinctiveness or embracing a shared idiom.

In the end, Congregation Anshi Chesed sought to accommodate both visions. But not without a struggle which underscored the tensions inherent in becoming a modern American Jew through the translucence of glass, the weightiness of stone, and the sheer evocative power of the commandments. □

ABOVE: JIM STEINHART OF TRAVELPHOTOBASE.COM; BELOW: WALTER ZIMMERMAN