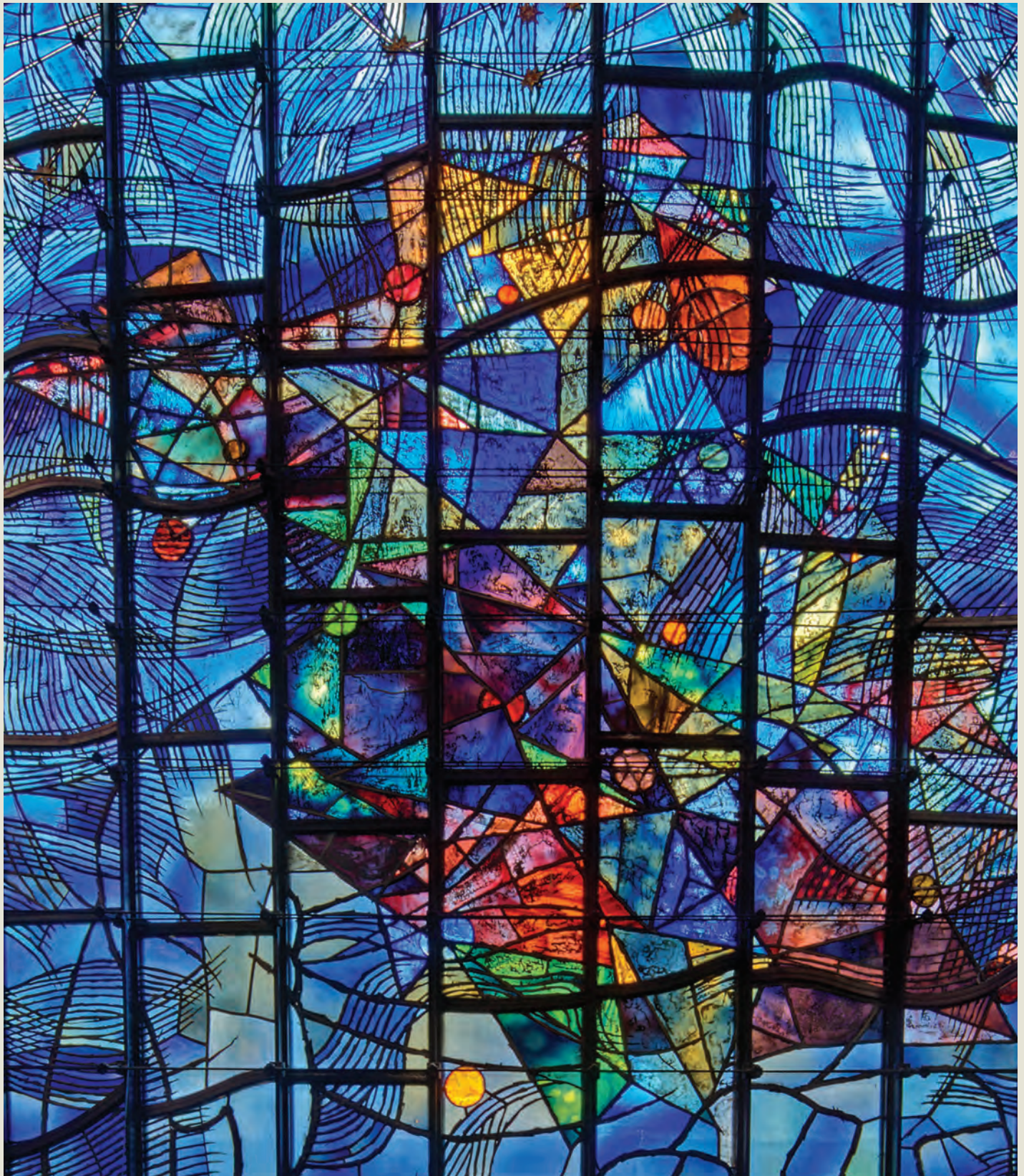


# STAINED GLASS

THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF THE STAINED GLASS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

WINTER 2018/19



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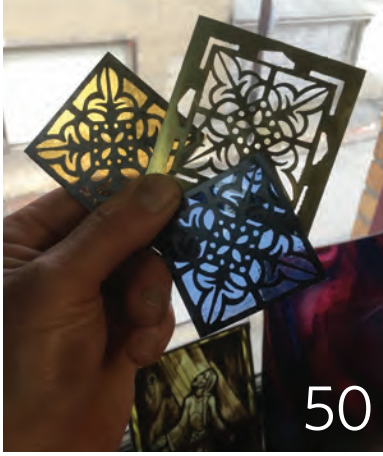
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Ben Shahn's **Bimah Window** (detail), Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, NY. Photograph by Mark F. Heffron.



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STAINED GLASS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

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### ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES


255 Pratt Street  
Buffalo, NY 14204  
800-438-9581 / 816-737-2090  
sgqeditorial@gmail.com  
www.stainedglass.org  
www.stainedglassschool.org  
www.SGAAonline.com

### PUBLISHER

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255 Pratt Street  
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headquarters@SGAAonline.com  
www.stainedglass.org

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# The Windows of Temple Beth Zion

By Mark F. Heffron and Megan McElfresh, with generous assistance from Mireille Gilsoul

One of Buffalo, New York's most prominent landmarks is Temple Beth Zion on Delaware Avenue, a unique modern building surrounded by much more traditional neighbors in the Delaware Avenue Historic District. Founded in 1850, Temple Beth Zion was the first Jewish Reform congregation in Buffalo. The original building stood at 599 Delaware Avenue from 1890 until it was destroyed by fire in 1961. Only one Torah was rescued from the fire that destroyed the original temple.

The new house of worship, sited several blocks north of the original, was designed by the acclaimed architect Max Abramovitz and dedicated in a series of services in April of 1967. Every facet of the worship space at Temple Beth Zion is infused with layers of meaning. Francis R. Kowsky, prominent Buffalo historian, writes: "Members of the congregation who remembered the massive dome and brilliantly ornamented walls of Edward Kent's former synagogue must have been surprised by the cool, abstract nature of Abramovitz's new

synagogue. Believing that synagogues need not conform to any particular shape or style, Abramovitz chose an oval shape with a flat roof for the sanctuary. Abramovitz chose to have his building express to the passerby ecumenical sentiments of hands upraised in prayer and the ancient Judeo-Christian heritage of the Ten Commandments. Given the terrible events of the recent Holocaust years, Abramovitz's portrayal of the new Temple Beth Zion as a place of reflection and affirmation expressed the spirit of the times."<sup>1</sup>

World-renowned artist, painter, and calligrapher Ben Shahn (1898-1969) was brought in to design the windows among other elements of the new worship space: the Commandment Tablets, and the menorah. This year, the congregation is marking the 50th year since Ben Shahn's death—and how his windows continue to move the soul as if they were installed only yesterday.

The windows at Temple Beth Zion have a special significance as the windows behind the altar were the first

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MIREILLE GILSOUL



PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



FACING PAGE:

The East window contains a massive upturned hand, symbolizing creation. The lines swirling about the hand represent the voice out of the whirlwind that spoke to a suffering Job (Job 38:4-7). The colors and designs are meant to give a focus for meditation.

THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT:

Benoît Gilsoul on scaffolding; artist Ben Shahn; Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, NY designed by architect Max Abramovitz, as seen from Delaware Ave. The walls rise 45 feet from the Delaware Ave entrance, flaring outward at 15 degrees, firmly anchored to a pedestal 50 feet below ground level.



Entering from the center aisle, you look out over the 1,000-seat sanctuary; the ceiling rises to a height of 62 feet. The bimah is dominated by the 30-foot high Commandment Tablets, the Holy Ark, and the East window.

# *“When he saw the windows, Ben Shahn cried.”*

- Mireille Gilsoul, daughter of glass artist, Benoît Gilsoul



ever to be made from a Ben Shahn painting.<sup>2</sup> The congregation had purchased a painting of Shahn’s at a New York art gallery. The painting became the inspiration and design for the bimah window. The painting was translated into a stained glass cartoon by Benoît Gilsoul (1914–2000), who also did the detailed acid etching of the flashed glasses. Shahn and Gilsoul also worked together to design and translate a stained glass window for the large façade window over Delaware Avenue; both were constructed by Willet Studios.

Benoît Gilsoul would come to note this commission as one of his most important works during all his time in stained glass and he wrote of working with Ben Shahn:

“When I first met Ben Shahn it was late in his life, I was familiar with his art by what I had seen in Museum and in books... It was the first time that Ben Shahn was commissioned to make a transfer of one of his work in stained glass.

Accepting to help, I want to be loyal to the artist, I want to know more about Ben Shan, to be faithful to the man, to his talent, to his art, to his philosophy.

As Chagall, Ben Shahn could not be separated from his roots. Picasso looking at Chagall said “he has an angel in his head.” and it could be said “Ben Shahn has love in his heart.” For him the search for truth, for justice, for peace, his concern for the others was and are the basic of Judaism

#### THIS PAGE, LEFT:

The first Hebrew letter of each commandment is worked in mosaic using glass smalti and measures 16 by 40 inches. The “Tablets of Law,” as they are often called, are frequently used in synagogue ornamentation; however, Shahn’s use of mosaic letters and gold leaf is unique.

#### RIGHT:

The gold leaf lettering for the rest of the commandment text appears below the first letter, which is surrounding by an aureole of intricately designed lettering in gold leaf. The playful animal-like shapes of the mosaic letters are often seen in Shahn’s work.

and his concern is obvious in his artwork. It could be the simpler things of life, the joys and sufferings of human beings, above all the scandals and injustices which comes up in the course of his life or at the ends the words of the bible. Because of that the pictorial vision of Ben Shahn is very wide and different, his artwork has another dimension, a depth rarely achieved, blending art and substance with intensity the artwork becomes the vehicle of a deep communication, it shows that anywhere the presence of the other is never as vivid than in the plastics arts, a real dialogue between the artist and the spectator. I want to introduce myself not as an imitator of his work but to capture in my own self the essence of his thinking in this specific job which blend of immense with transcendence it was and with my own limits that's for sure. After that I have to learn more about his technique, his way with the colors, with the lines so special in Ben Shahn, in a word his gestures.”

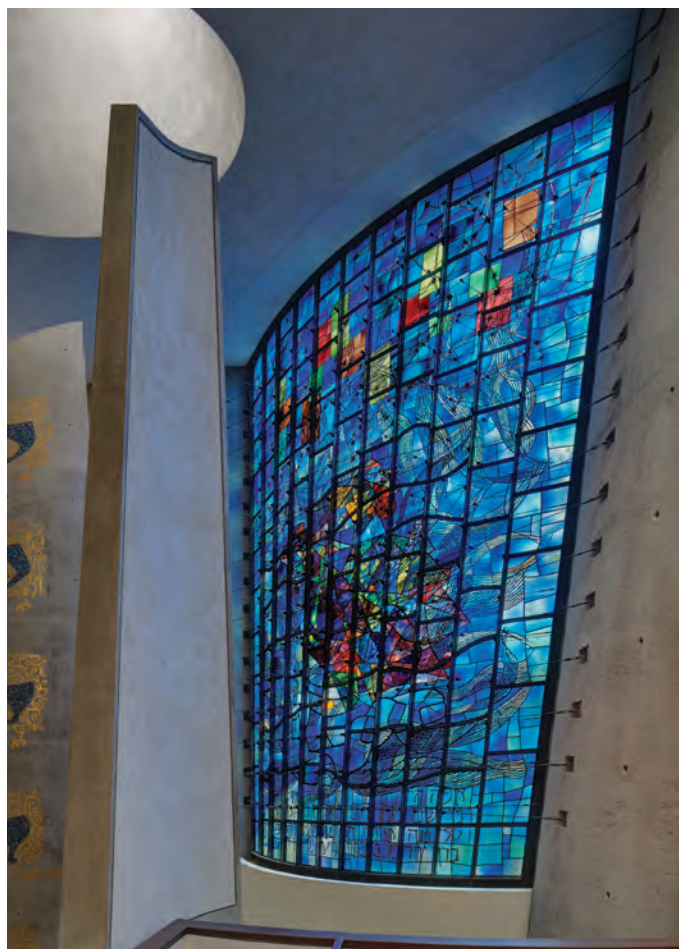
The windows and ritual objects were dedicated on Saturday afternoon, April 22, 1967 at 2:00 p.m. Muriel Willett wrote a description of the windows that began as follows:

“True collaboration starts with a confrontation of artistic genius and skilled craftsmanship. This is the catalyst that can translate creative art into the glory that is glass. But confidence, dedication, forbearance, humility, patience, understanding—these are some of the extra ingredients that tip the scales towards success.

So it was with the bimah window at Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo. A great artist dreamed a dream of Creation. With his brush he indicated God's gigantic upturned hand at that moment before time when, out of the void swirling with embryonic possibilities, waves of darkness and of light began to form the firmament. The artist was Ben Shahn. Across the bottoms of his painting, in the exquisite calligraphy for which he is world famous, he wrote the Hebrew text, those words heard by Job from the whirlwind, which translated read in part:

“Where wast thou when I laid the foundations  
of the earth?  
When the morning stars sang together,  
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?”  
(Job 38:4-7)

It has been said that when Ben Shahn came to view his windows installed, his goosebumps had goosebumps. Today, viewers experience the same deep dialogue when they enter the church. As a visitor, you are compelled to a state of reflection. The scalloped sanctuary rises up, both antique and new in its feel. So masterful is the construction that it is a space unlike any other. As you walk slowly down the aisle from Delaware Avenue, the East Window seems



to move in its depth of color and form as you approach. A swirling, powerful sea of color comes into focus, the hand of God becoming clear. I have watched countless people come to the sanctuary to experience this temple and every one of them has had a powerful response. Tears are not uncommon. The gravity and the emotion have not dulled with age, the intention as clear today as it has ever been.

#### Notes

1. Kowsky, Francis R. National Register Application for Temple Beth Zion.
2. Allen, Clare (1967, April 16) Distinctive edifice to be dedicated this week. *Buffalo Courier-Express*, pp 2, 3.

*This article is a collaboration between photographer Mark F. Heffron and SGAA staff member Megan McElfresh, with generous assistance from Mireille Gilsoul, daughter of Benoît Gilsoul. ■*

#### THIS PAGE:

The East window measures 32 by 40 feet in size and represents the story of Creation as told in the Book of Job. The windows are held in place by means of stressed steel cables stretched across the openings on the interior that are not present on the exterior of the building.





TOP:

Above the Holy Ark hangs the Ner Tamid, the eternal light. The tradition of an ever-burning light dates back to the days of the Temple where the Menorah was never permitted to go out. The lectern, where the Torah is read, is in the shape of an open book, a symbol of our commitment to study.

BOTTOM:

The west wall window, over the Delaware Avenue entrance, is Psalm 150, which calls upon us to praise God.