

Our Bimah Chairs

Destroyed by the Central Synagogue Sanctuary fire in 1998, our needlepoint-covered bimah chairs have been restored to their original Moorish Revival beauty



On September 11, 2009, Central Synagogue dedicated new bimah chairs, a gift from Nancy Fisher and Marc Kirschner in honor of Dr. Janice Gabrilove, whose mother Hilda Gabrilove worked with members of the Synagogue's Sisterhood on the needlepoint covering of the original chairs in the 1970s.

Nancy Fisher, a longtime member and avid needlepointer, describes the dedication as "the culmination of the unique intersection of my love for Central Synagogue, my love for needlepointing, my life-threatening bout with lymphoma, extraordinary care from Dr. Gabrilove, and return to good health."

Nancy, who began battling cancer in the winter of 2008, spent many days under Dr. Gabrilove's care at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. There, Dr. Gabrilove learned that Nancy enjoyed needlepoint. She shared that her mother, Hilda Gabrilove, had also pursued the hobby. At the time, Nancy did not know of Hilda Gabrilove's connection to the bimah chairs.

A RESTORATION

Soon after that, Central Synagogue began plans for restoring the original chairs, which had been damaged in the fire. Nancy and Marc decided to donate eight brand new chairs in memory of Hilda Gabrilove and in honor of Nancy's physician, Dr. Janice Gabrilove, so that the Gabrilove family name would remain associated with the new chairs.

In honor of this occasion, Central Synagogue Archivist Anne Mininberg prepared the following historical account of the original bimah chairs:



Ahawath Chesed purchased and adapted a church at Avenue C and Fourth Street in the 1860s. It was their premises until 1872, when they moved to their present location on 55th Street and Lexington Avenue, a new synagogue which was designed for them by the architect Henry Fernbach in 1869, and consecrated on April 19, 1872.

There were four large armchairs, which were designed to be part of the overall architecture and scheme of Fernbach's decorative Moorish Revival style. The carving on the crest rail of the chairs replicates the designs surrounding their setting on the bimah. The alternating interlaced leaf pattern directly relates to the motifs on the cast-iron columns of the bimah arch, the carving on the wood ark columns and on the ark doors. The ark, designed by Henry Fernbach, was made by the Pottier and Stymus Co. in New York.

It is my instinct, based on some knowledge of furniture styles and the archival material about Central's early history, that several chairs with a carved lion head design were brought by Shaar Hashomayim when they merged with Ahawath Chesed in 1898. The chairs with a carved lion head design and the original Fernbach chairs had their upholstery redone with needlepoint by Central's Sisterhood in the 1970s.

In October 2009, Central Synagogue gifted one of the original Fernbach chairs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; one to the American Museum of Jewish History in Philadelphia; and one to Yeshiva University Museum in New York, along with the armchair of the "lion style," all for their permanent collections.

One of the original Fernbach chairs remains on the bimah, indicating the integrated original decorative program.