

MAGEN DAVID SYNAGOGUE, 2017 67th Street (aka 2017-2023 67th Street), Brooklyn.
Built 1920-21; Maurice Courland, arch.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 5563, Lot 68.

On February 13, 2001, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Magen David Synagogue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were four speakers in favor of designation, including the president and another representative of the congregation and a representative of the Historic Districts Council. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission also received a letter in support of designation from the congregation.

Summary

The brick, neo-Romanesque Revival style Magen David Synagogue in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn was designed by architect Maurice Courland and was constructed in 1920-21 for New York's flourishing Syrian-Jewish community. This close-knit group had begun immigrating to the United States during the first decade of the twentieth century and within ten years their improving economic situation enabled them to move away from Manhattan's crowded Lower East Side and Williamsburg, Brooklyn to more spacious suburban surroundings. For more than twenty years, this handsome building, with its varied brick patterns, its colorful and carefully-sited round-arched windows, its Middle-Eastern motifs, and its unusual roof arrangement, was the centerpiece of life for this Orthodox Jewish community. The Magen David Synagogue continues to hold a special place as the "mother" synagogue constructed for this group although many Syrian Jews have moved out of the area to Midwood, Gravesend, and the Jersey Shore. This building is the location of funerals for members of this community, even for those who have moved away, and serves as a concrete reminder of a vibrant and growing group in its search for the American dream of religious freedom and economic improvement.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Syrian-Jewish Community of New York¹

Most Syrian-Jews in New York came from the northern Syrian towns of Damascus and Aleppo where Jews have lived since the Roman era. The Jewish population of this town increased significantly after the Jewish expulsion from Spain in the 16th century, and by the beginning of the 20th century it included many thousands of Jews. Religious practices there were influenced by this incursion of people from Spain, as well as by the proximity to Arab cultures; Arabic was spoken at home, and Hebrew for prayers. This culture was called Sephardic, as distinguished from the Ashkenazic Jews who came from Eastern Europe.

Beginning primarily in 1907-08, thousands of these Syrian Jews were motivated to immigrate to New York because of their country's shifting political landscape, the threat of conscription into the Turkish army, and economic opportunity. These people were poor, but not persecuted, and many left their homeland reluctantly, with a strong desire to maintain their culture and heritage. This goal was made easier by the fact that their language and customs were so different from the large numbers of recently-arrived Eastern European Jews living on New York's Lower East Side.

The Syrian-Jewish community started out in the same neighborhood, with most men working as peddlers and later, as they prospered, shopkeepers. By 1911-12, they were able to rent rooms in a loft building on Orchard Street to serve as their first synagogue, Sháaré Sedek. By 1918, the Syrian-Jewish community in New York had grown to 4-5,000 people, and through mutual help and hard work, their economic condition had also improved. They moved as a group to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where they stayed for four years, directly across the river from their places of business in Manhattan.

The completion of the Sea Beach line of the BMT subway in 1914 opened the previously rural sections of Brooklyn to suburban settlement and by 1919, Syrian-Jewish families began moving to Bensonhurst, where large amounts of cheap land were available.² The rest of the community soon followed, settling near Twentieth Avenue, between 60th and 72nd Streets.

History of the Magen David Synagogue

A group of the first Syrian Jews to arrive in Bensonhurst founded the Magen David (meaning Shield or Star of David) Congregation, which was officially chartered by the state of New York in 1919. At first

their religious services were held in the basement of an Ashkenazic synagogue on 66th Street, but soon they were able to purchase a nearby rowhouse on 66th Street between 19th and 20th Avenues. A huge influx of new immigrants from Syria around 1919, created a further need for new facilities.

Aslan and Salha Chalom, members of the Syrian-Jewish community, purchased a lot on 67th Street in October, 1919.³ The next year they donated the property to the Magen David Congregation to build a new synagogue.⁴ The cornerstone for the new building was laid on September 12, 1920 and it was opened and dedicated on December 21, 1921.

The congregation hired architect Maurice Courland to design the new building. A Jewish architect who came from the Middle East, Courland specialized in synagogues and school buildings. For the Magen David Congregation, the group required a sanctuary large enough to accommodate at least 500 worshippers, to serve for many years to come.

Maurice Courland⁵

Maurice Courland (1892-1957), a native of Palestine, was educated at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and at City College in New York. He practiced architecture in Buenos Aires and then established himself professionally in New York in 1919. In the late 1920s he was president of Maurander Realty Company. Courland specialized in the design of synagogues and schools, including P. S. 28 at 155th Street and Broadway, the Gates of Hope Temple at 711 West 179th Street, and the Free Synagogue of Flushing at 41-60 Kissena Boulevard. In the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District, Courland designed a neo-Renaissance style apartment building, a project for which the Maurander Realty Company acted as developer. Later in his life, Courland joined with his son Raphael in the firm of Maurice Courland & Son. He was a member of the American Institute of Architects and the New York Society of Architects.

Synagogue Architecture and the Magen David Synagogue⁶

The Jewish religion does not require particular forms or designs for places of worship, except for some direction as to the interior arrangement of several important ritual objects. Jewish prayer services can occur in individual rooms, former church buildings, or

private houses. In Europe, where the much-persecuted members did not want their places of worship to stand out, synagogues were often small, unobtrusive buildings of no particular style. When the Jewish population felt more comfortable in a community, they attempted more artistically-designed synagogue buildings, usually following the popular stylistic trends of that place and time. The Romanesque style synagogue in Worms dates from c. 1100 and a Gothic style building in Prague dates from the 12th or 13th centuries. In St. Petersburg there is a synagogue that looks like a Russian Greek Church, while in Jerusalem another synagogue resembles a mosque.

In New York, the first synagogue building was the modest, masonry structure built for the Shearith Israel Congregation in 1729, known as the Mill Street Synagogue (demolished). Those constructed in other American cities reflected the local styles, such as the Georgian designs of the synagogues in Newport, Rhode Island and Charleston, South Carolina dating from the late 1700s. In the early nineteenth century, synagogues were constructed with columns and temple fronts reflecting the popular Greek Revival style. At mid-century, both Gothic and Romanesque Revival designs were used for synagogue buildings, suggesting the ancient character of the religion.⁷ Later in the nineteenth century synagogues reflected the general design trends in the country and employed a variety of romantic revival styles, including the Classical revival, Renaissance revival, or Moorish revival. The Romanesque revival was also popular, sometimes as an adaptation of the *Rundbogenstil* introduced by German emigré architects and publications at mid-century.⁸

Near the turn of the twentieth century, synagogue architects, like other American designers, were influenced by the return to classicism that became common after the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. At this same time, archeological expeditions in Palestine were uncovering synagogue structures dating back to the Greco-Roman period, which also displayed classical forms. In 1897, the well-known synagogue architect, Arnold Brunner designed a temple-fronted structure for Shearith Israel on Central Park West and West 70th Street that included huge columns, pilasters, and a large pediment (a designated New York City Landmark and located within the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District). Actual examples of earlier buildings led to more historically accurate details in synagogue designs.

After World War I, architects tended to simpler shapes and plainer, more geometric buildings. Although

many designs continued to have historical references, new building technologies were forcing architects to approach their plans in new ways.

The Magen David Synagogue building is a simple structure, constructed with a modern steel skeleton, in which patterned brick and carefully placed, contrasting design elements suggestive of a previous era create a dignified and pleasing effect, worthy of the great symbolic importance of this first synagogue built in New York for the Syrian-Jewish community. The projecting side piers suggesting buttressing, the round-arched windows, and the solid, masonry facade allude to the Romanesque period, adding gravity and a historical context to the building. Egyptian motifs above the main door and on the stone panels near the roofline are suggestive of the Middle Eastern provenance of both the congregation and the architect. The Jewish symbols, such as the menorah in the stained glass, the stone Tablets of the Law at the pinnacle of the front roof, and the Bronze Star of David at the top of the pyramidal roof express the building's purpose.

Subsequent History

For more than twenty years the Syrian-Jewish community thrived in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, maintaining their culture and worshipping together at the Magen David Synagogue. Shortly after the synagogue was constructed, the need for a synagogue school became obvious. The adjoining lot was purchased in 1924⁹ and the building opened in 1925. This lot was separated again in 1969 when the congregation sold the building. The synagogue repurchased the property in 1985 but the lots remain separate. (The school building is not part of this designation.)

For many years this synagogue was where the chief Rabbi of the Syrian-Jewish community Jacob Kassin, was affiliated. In the 1940s most Syrian Jews moved farther out in Brooklyn to Midwood and Gravesend where they could get larger houses for their still-growing population. Several new synagogues were constructed there, but the Magen David Synagogue continues to serve a small group who remain in the neighborhood. This building holds a special emotional place for Syrian Jews and it is common for members of the Syrian-Jewish community who do not attend here regularly to have their funerals at this building.

Description

The Magen David Synagogue is a two-story building on a raised granite basement. Clad in Flemish-

bond brick, the neo-Romanesque Revival style building is enlivened with a variety of brick designs and stone details, round-headed windows, and a red terra-cotta tile roof. The building sits in a paved courtyard enclosed by the original iron fence at the lot line.

The front facade of the building is three bays wide and symmetrically-arranged. The designs of each side bay are repeated on the front bay of each side facade, beyond which the building steps back slightly. This creates a front section which is slightly wider than the rest of the building, and serves as an entry and stair hall for the synagogue. The rest of the building extends towards the rear for three bays and is the location of the sanctuary. The rear facade of the building has a one-story projection which houses the Torah ark.

The three-bay front facade is organized around the central entranceway. A short set of stairs framed by granite stair-walls and iron railings leads to the front entrance. The slightly-projecting central section contains a double-height arch formed by molded bricks, within which is set a pair of non-historic doors with diamond-shaped panels filled by stained glass with a Star of David motif. The doors are topped by a wood-framed rectangular transom divided into four sections, each with diamond-paned stained glass. Stone moldings frame the doorway and transom and are topped by a cornice ornamented by attenuated papyrus leaves. Mounted above this cornice are two stone panels engraved with the Hebrew and English names of the congregation and a six-pointed star (a *Magen David*). The panels are flanked by short, engaged columns and topped by an entablature with a denticulated cornice. The rounded tympanum above this section is filled by diamond-paned stained glass enhanced by a six-armed candelabra, or *menorah*. Decorative iron and glass lanterns are mounted to each side of the doorway and beyond these are two wooden flagpoles supported by cables attached to the brick.

The two side sections of the front facade are identical. A single, narrow, round-headed window is centered in each side bay at the first story level. Each has a stone sill and is topped by a brick arch and filled with diamond-paned stained glass set in a wooden sash. At the top story level is a group of four round-arched windows with similar glass, sharing a common stone sill and linked by short stone pilasters. Brick arches frame each window, with decorative brick moldings extending down from the outside edges of each group to the base, forming a large inset panel. Above each group of four windows a horizontal stone panel inset in

the brick is ornamented with a six-petaled floral motif in bas relief. These and all the windows of this building are protected by non-historic wire mesh grates.

The roofline reflects the three sections of the front facade, each of which is framed by brick piers which rise slightly above the rest of the roof. An inset stepped brick pattern emphasizes the pitched angle of the center section, which is crowned at its peak by stone Tablets of the Law. The side sections have flat roofs and the entire roof is capped by flat stone coping.

The side facades are almost identical and the first bay of the side facades has the same design as the side bays on the front facade, including a single window at the first story, grouped windows at the upper story (three on the side facade) and brick arches, moldings, and a decorative stone panel. The eastern facade, has a single, non-historic doorway at the front edge of the building, with a non-historic brick and stone stairway with iron railing for access. The other side has a small door at ground level in the first bay.

The three side bays beyond the first are separated by projecting brick piers articulated with stone blocks at the water table level and near the top of the building. Panels of brick set in various decorative designs enliven each bay, which also contains a round-headed, double-height window. Each window is composed of stained glass set in wood sash, and has a stone sill and a brick arch surround. The central window is slightly taller, and includes a round section containing a Star of David (*Magen David*), while the two end windows have a bifurcated design. Along the side facades the brick piers rise slightly above the rest of the roof line, which is entirely finished with a narrow, stone coping. The center of the building is covered by a shallow, hipped roof on an octagonal base. The red tiles on the roof are crowned by a three-dimensional Star of David located at the peak. The roof sits on a raised, octagonal drum pierced by round-arched windows which light the center of the sanctuary below.

The rear facade is not visible from the street. There is a one-story projection across part of the facade, with a small, round-headed window centered in its eastern facade and a plain service door in the rear facade of the main part of the building.

Report prepared and written by
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Research Department

NOTES

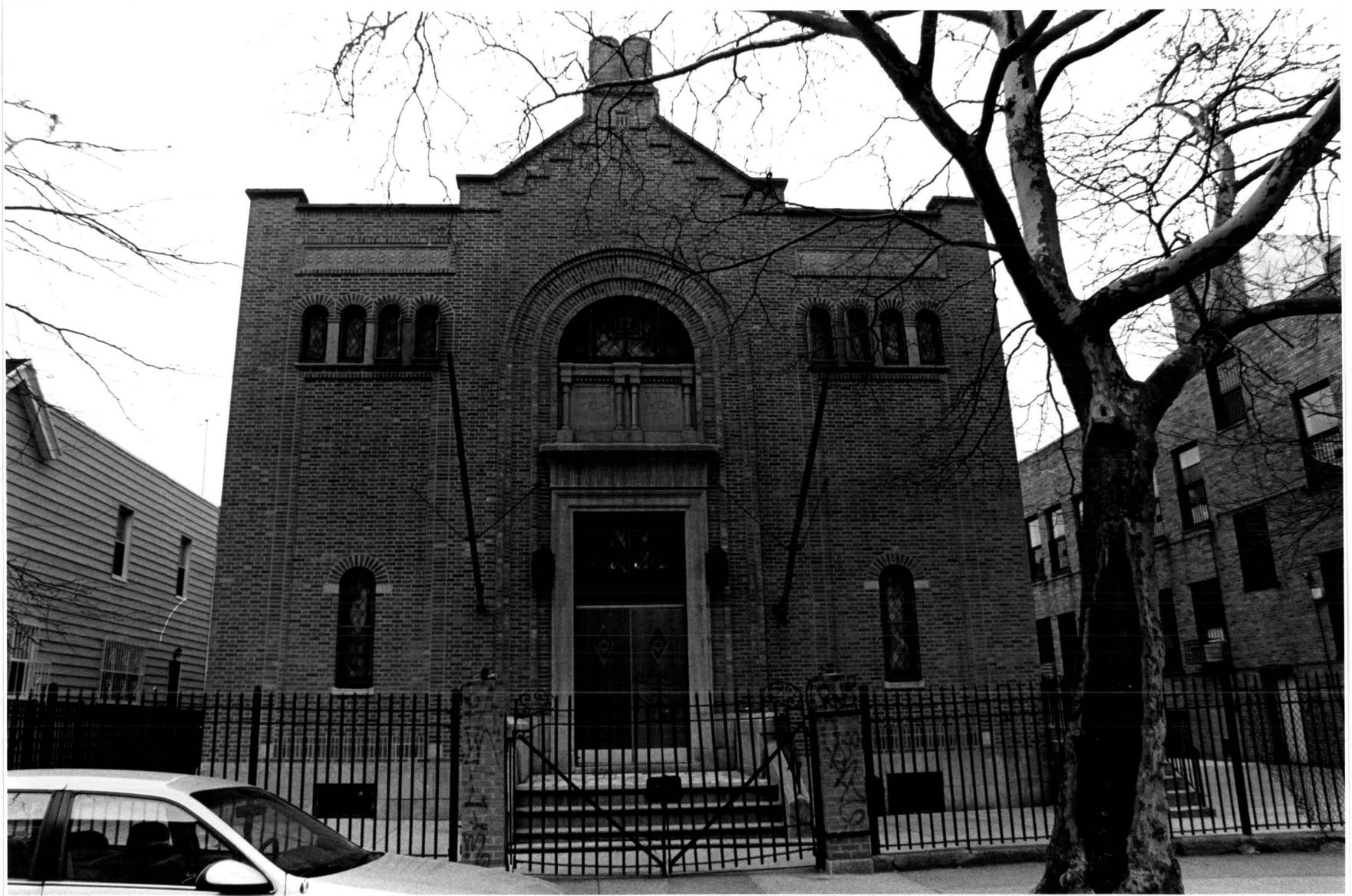
1. This history was compiled from Joseph A. D. Sutton, *Magic Carpet : Aleppo-in-Flatbush, The Story of a Unique Ethnic Jewish Community* (New York: Thayer-Jacoby, 1979); Sutton, *Aleppo Chronicles, the Story of the Unique Sephardeem of the Ancient Near East, in Their Own Words* (New York: Thayer-Jacoby, 1988); and a historical booklet, *Magen David Congregation*, published by the congregation in 1925. Mr. Sam Catton, a long-time member of the congregation and President of the Sephardic Heritage Foundation, and Mr. Edmund Levy, President of the congregation, were also very generous with information about the community and the building.
2. The movement of the Syrian-Jewish community to the neighborhood coincided with local development. Sixty-sixth and Sixty-seventh Streets were opened and paved in 1912, and beginning in 1914, realty and construction companies began purchasing most of the lots in the area.
3. Kings County Registers Office, Liber deeds and conveyances, Liber 3817, p. 375, October 12, 1919. Aslan Chalom was a member of the congregation's first Board of Trustees.
4. Kings County Registers Office, Liber deeds and conveyances, Liber 4006, p.253, December 21, 1920.
5. Information about Maurice Courlan was compiled from the following sources: Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District Designation Report (LP-1647)* (New York: City of New York, 198), Architects' Appendix; Maurice Courland obituary *New York Times* (11/18/57), 31; Norval White & Elliot Willensky, *AIA Guide to New York City* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 851; *American Architects Directory*, George S. Koyl, ed. (New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1962), 138.
6. This section was compiled from information in the research files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission; and Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Anshe Slonim Synagogue Designation Report (LP-1440)* (New York: City of New York, 1987), and *Pike Street Synagogue (Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie) Designation Report (LP-1960)* (New York: City of New York, 1997), both reports prepared by Virginia Kurshan.
7. Moorish designs also came to be seen as acceptable because of the long Jewish presence in Moorish Spain. After the German architect, Gottfried Semper, designed a synagogue in Dresden (1838-40) which displayed a mixture of Byzantine and Saracenic forms, these were also used on American synagogues. Later, the Gothic style came to be seen as too closely related to the Christian religion to be appropriate.
8. Kathleen Curran, "The German Rundbogenstil and Reflections on the American Round-Arched Style," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 47 (Dec. 1988), 351-373. The *Rundbogenstil* was the result of an effort by progressive German architects to create a synthesis of classical and medieval architecture by drawing on historical precedents in the round-arched Byzantine, Romanesque, and Renaissance styles. The bifurcated window, which included a large, round arch with a pair of inscribed windows topped by a bull's eye tympanum, was a common motif of this style. Thought by nineteenth century theorists to have originated in northern Italy during the Romanesque period and widely used during the Renaissance, this form became a hallmark of the nineteenth-century round-arched styles, both here and in Germany. See also LPC, *128 West 18th Street Stable Designation Report (LP-1816)* (New York: City of New York, 1990), report prepared by Gale Harris.
9. Kings County Registers Office, Liber deeds and conveyances. Liber 4477, p. 56, recorded Nov. 21, 1924.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Magen David Synagogue has a special character, and special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Magen David Synagogue, constructed in 1920-21 for New York's growing Syrian-Jewish community, is a solid and enduring reminder of the vibrant culture brought to the United States by Jewish emigres from northern Syria during the first decade of the twentieth century; that this was the first synagogue constructed by and for this group after they came to the United States and it continues to serve as the symbolic "mother" synagogue even though most Syrian Jews have moved from this neighborhood; that this group came in large numbers to the United States during the first decade of the twentieth century, living in close proximity, first on Manhattan's Lower East Side and then in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, before moving to Bensonhurst; that they have kept their identity and cohesiveness through nearly one hundred years of living in America; that the building's architect, Maurice Courland, used stylistic references from the Middle East, as well as more common Jewish symbols to create a building that would make this immigrant group feel at home; that the architect used a variety of interesting brick patterns and well-placed widow openings to enliven the facades of this building; that the neo-Romanesque Revival style, with its simplified volumes draws on historical references to add a feeling of solidity to the synagogue building, and by inference, to the community of which it was such an important part.

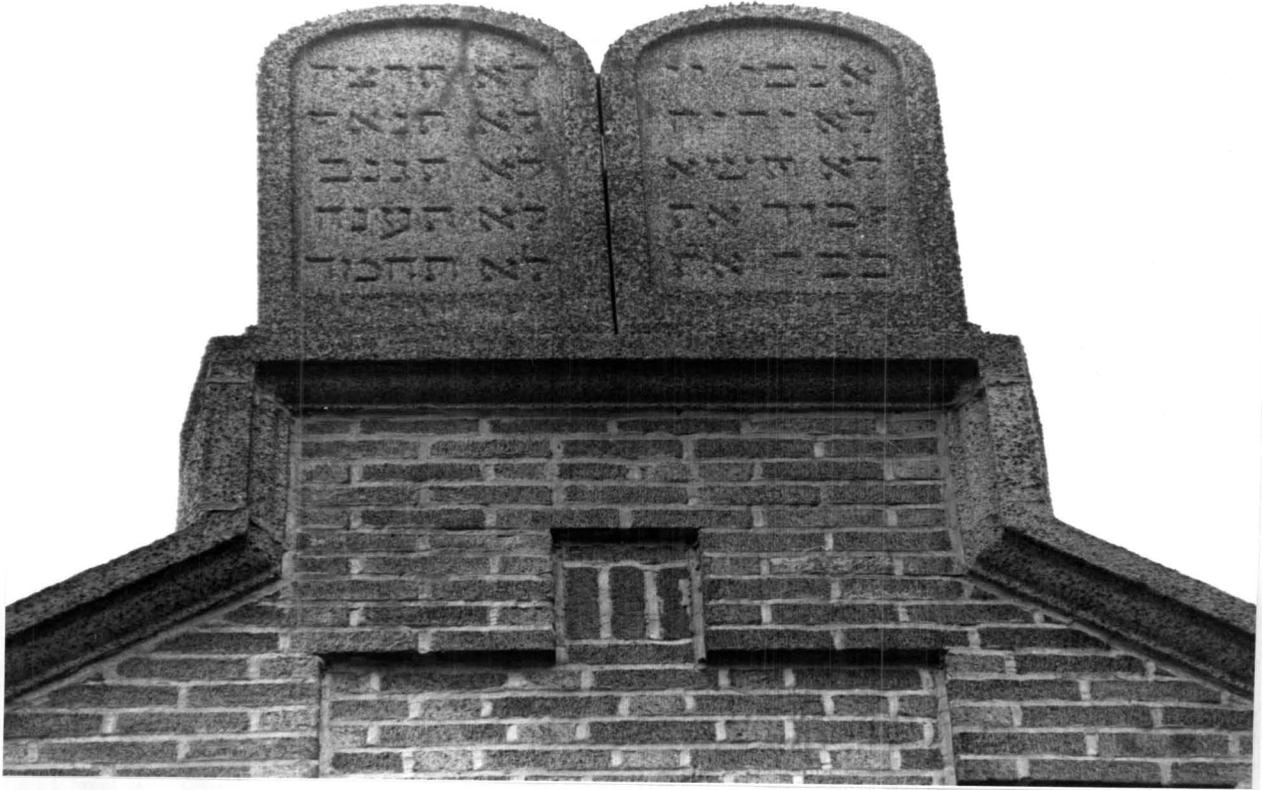
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Magen David Synagogue, 2017 67th Street (aka 2017-2023 67th Street), Brooklyn, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 5563, Lot 68 as its Landmark Site.



Magen David Synagogue
2017 67th Street, Brooklyn
Photo: Carl Forster



Magen David Synagogue
2017 67th Street, Brooklyn
Photo: Carl Forster



Roof Detail, "Tablets of the Law"

Magen David Synagogue

Stained glass window detail, Menorah



Photos: Carl Forster

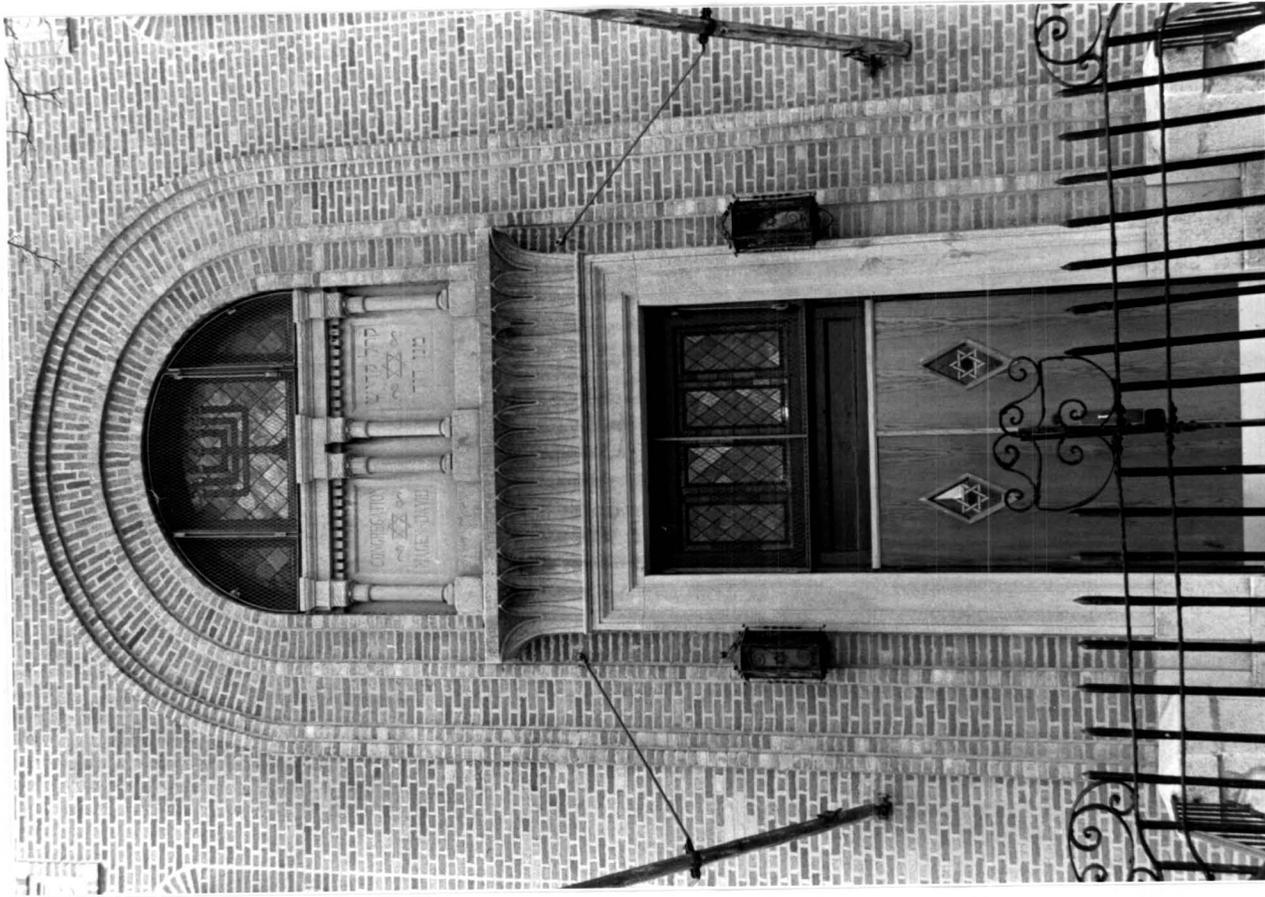


Roof Detail

Magen David Synagogue

Window detail, front facade





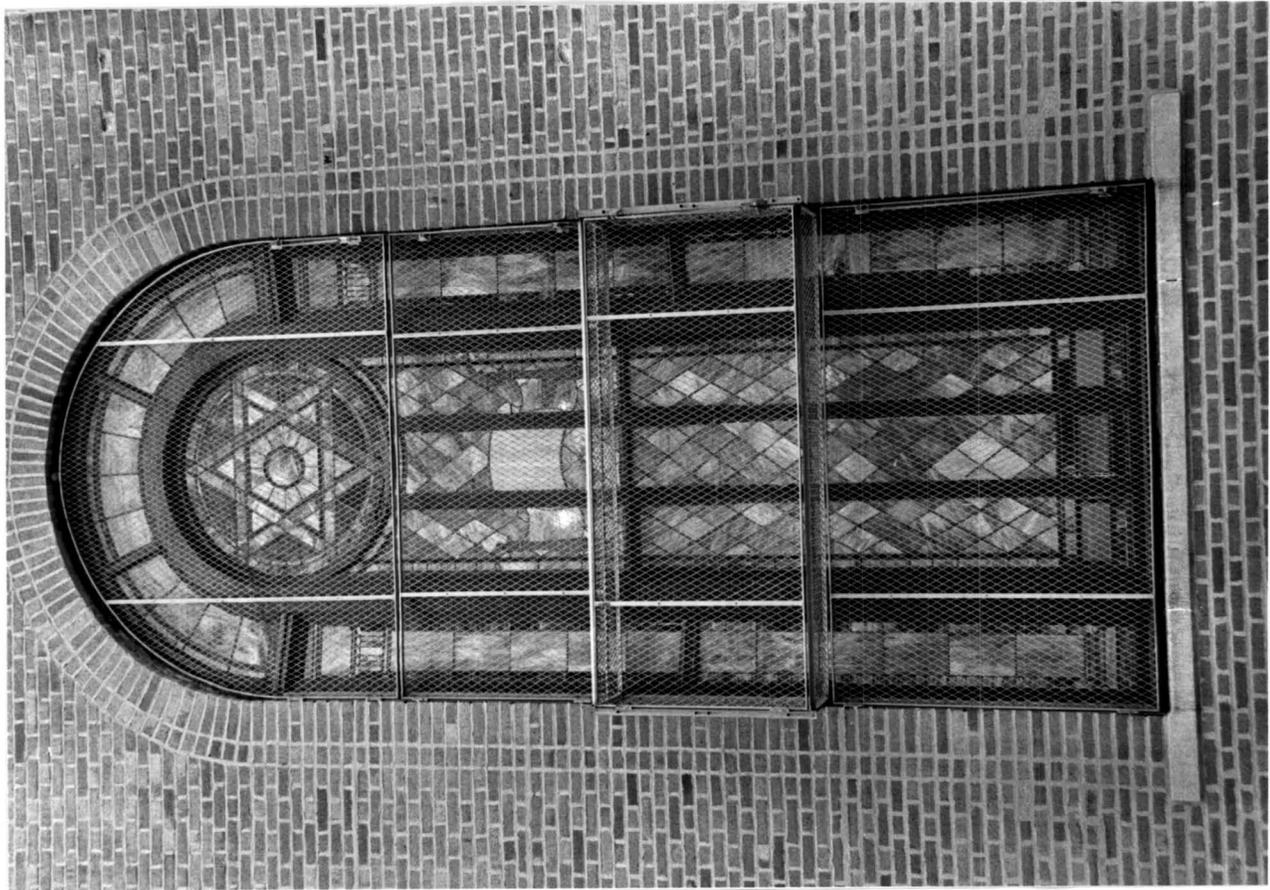
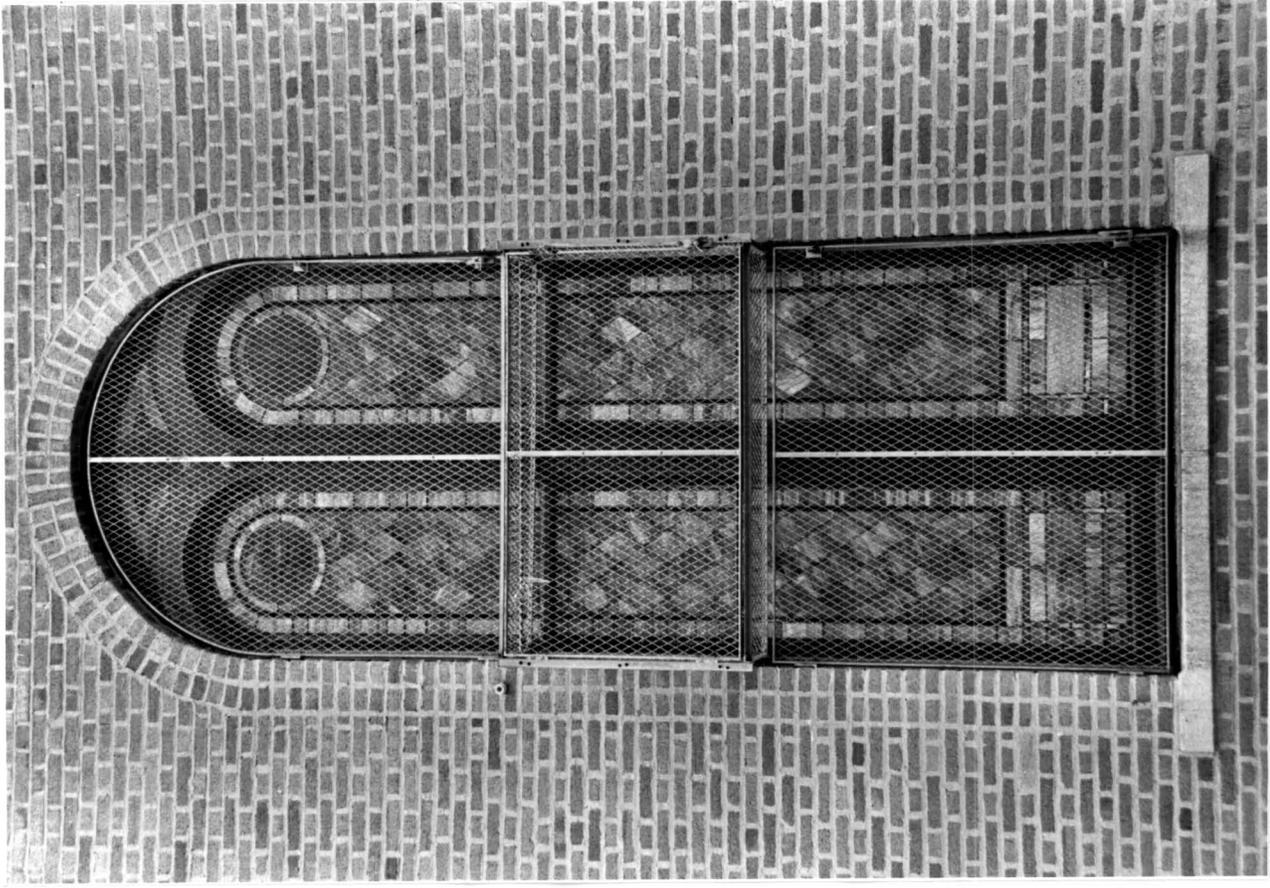
Main Entrance



Lantern detail near front door

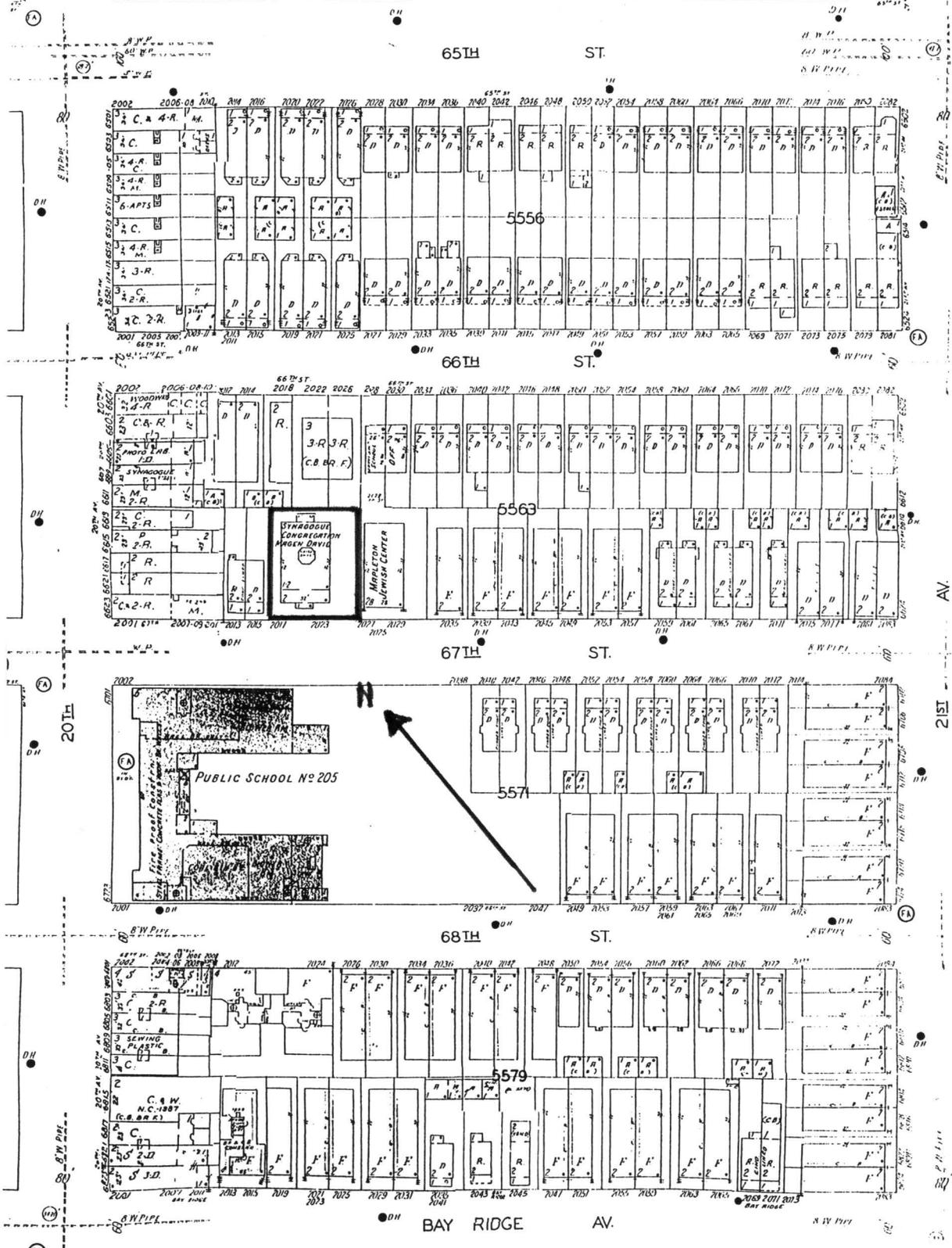
Magen David Synagogue

Photos: Carl Forster



Magen David Synagogue
Stained glass window details
Photos: Carl Forster

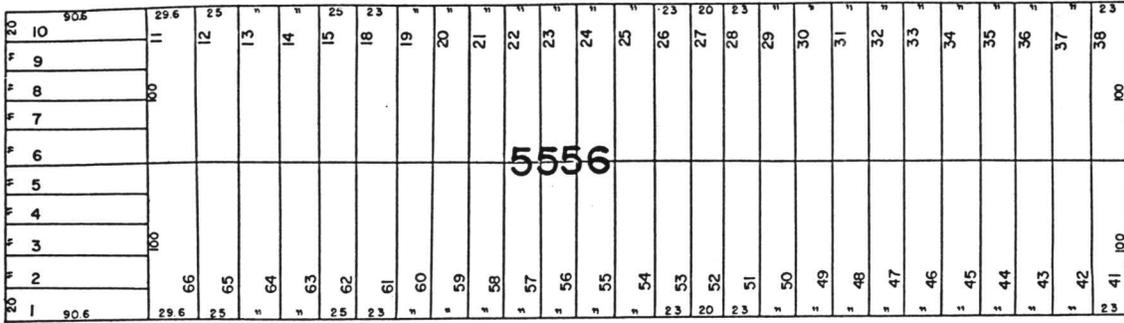
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MAGEN DAVID SYNAGOGUE
 2017 67th Street (aka 1707-2023 67th Street), Brooklyn
 Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 5563, Lot 68
 Source: Sanborn Building & Property Atlas, 2000-01, Brooklyn, NY, vol.12, pl. 66

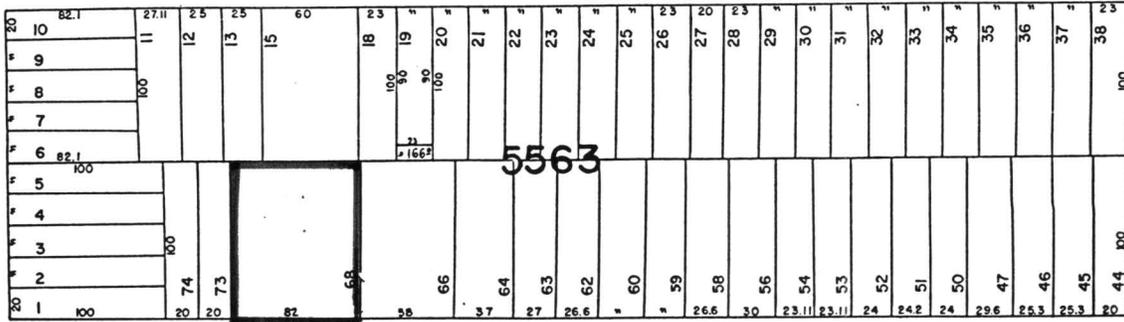
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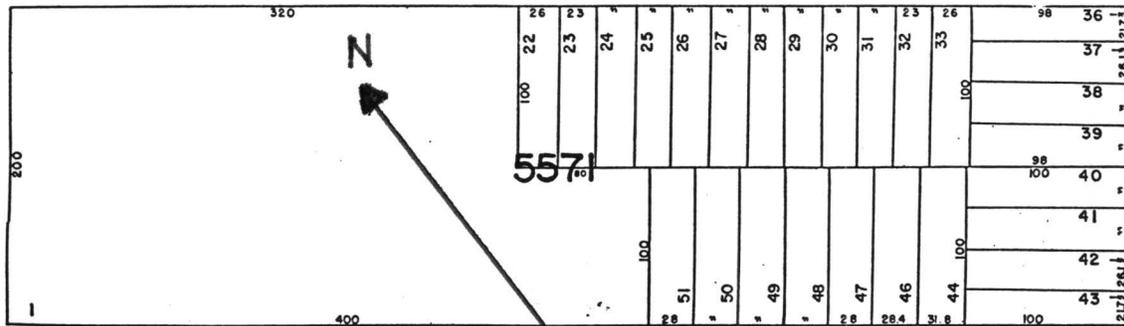
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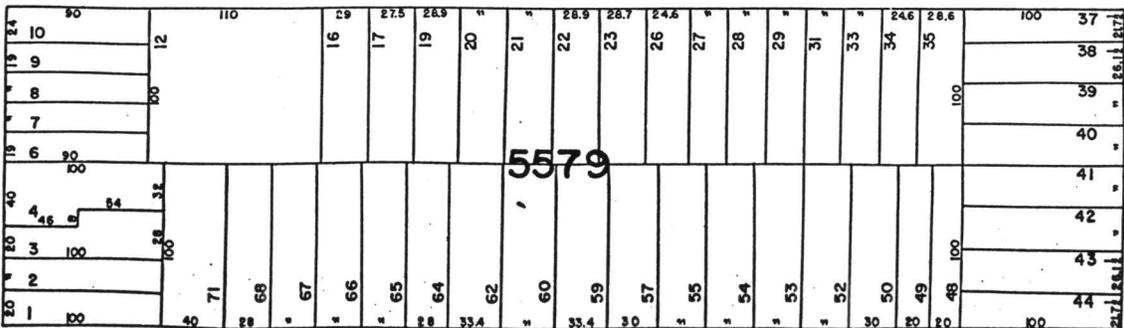
67TH

ST.



68TH

ST.



69TH

ST.

AVE.

AVE.

20TH

21ST

MAGEN DAVID SYNAGOGUE

2017 67th Street (aka 2017-2023 67th Street), Brooklyn

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Source: Sanborn Building & Property Atlas, 2000-01, Brooklyn, NY, vol.12, pl. 66