

A Look at Our Chapel Windows

By Robert Pollack



Windows left of Chapel Ark

Going every Friday to morning minyan, rain or shine, has become very important to me. It is my chance to express my gratitude, and to be part of a group that regularly shares the serious gift and burden of kaddish.

About a month ago I realized that davening in the 89th St. Chapel offered us all a second gift, the gift of BJ's connection with the Jewish past through art.

In the 89th St. Chapel the Ark is bracketed and embraced by two sets of six colored windows. Each has the name of one of the twelve tribes. One day I went home after minyan and checked the Torah to see how those window designs were chosen.



Windows right of Chapel Ark

The tribes are enumerated twice, once in Bereshit and once in Devarim. To my astonishment, I found that these two enumerations and prophecies for the twelve tribes did not align well with each other. So, I asked myself, how were the images chosen for the two sets of six windows on either side of the Ark?

The following table (Table 1) is a summary of the references to the twelve tribes from the two texts where these are enumerated (in bold are the symbols depicted in the glass). The first is by Jacob as he is dying in exile in Egypt. The second is by Moshe, before he dies on the mountain unable to complete the journey from Egypt to The Promised Land.

Table 1

Tribe	Jacob (Ber 49)	Moshe (Dev 33)
Reuben	(1) turbulent as water	(1) live and be fertile
Simeon	(2) let my glory not enter their assembly	(12) Dev 27:12: says blessings at Gerazim
Levi	(3) let my glory not enter their assembly	(3) faithful priest, urim and thummim
Judah	(4) lion cub, bears scepter	(2) will fight
Zebulun	(5) ships	(6) rejoice in journeys
Issachar	(6) donkey, worker	(7) rejoice in tents
Dan	(7) justice for tribes	(9) lion's cub
Gad	(8) attacks attackers at heel	(8) leads assembly of heads of people
Asher	(9) Eats rich food	(11) most blessed
Naphtali	(10) doe, will bear fawns	(10) abounding with favor
Joseph	(11) fruitful vine, prince	(5) bull and ox in sons
Benjamin	(12) ravenous, devours	(4) shielded, loved by Lord

The following tables (Tables 2 and 3) elaborate on my analysis to the question: from which book of the Torah did the artist draw from when designing the windows? Simeon gave me the most trouble, followed by Benjamin. I took the tent of Simeon to be a reference from elsewhere in Devarim, where Moshe says that Simeon will be a tribe apart. For Benjamin, I took the image of a devouring, ravenous tribe to be the meaning of the fire.

Table 2: Right of the Ark

(click on an image to enlarge)







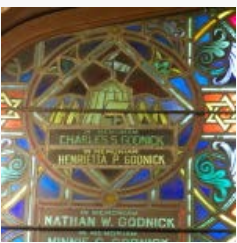





<p>(2) Judah - lion (Jacob)</p>		<p>(1) Levi - urim thurrim (Moshe)</p>	
<p>(4) Issachar - camel/donkey (Jacob)</p>		<p>(3) Simeon - blessings at Gerizim (Moshe)</p>	
<p>(6) Zebulun - ship at sea (Jacob)</p>		<p>(5) Reuvan - fertile tree (Moshe)</p>	

Table 3: Left of the Ark

<p>(8) Gad - tent of chieftan (Moshe)</p>		<p>(7) Naphthali - doe (Jacob)</p>	
<p>(10) Asher - tree, no fruit (Moshe)</p>		<p>(9) Dan - scales (Jacob)</p>	
<p>(12) Ephraim & Menashe - ox & horse (Moshe)</p>		<p>(11) Benjamin - oven with flames (Jacob)</p>	

When the two sides are put together (see images at the top of the page) reading vertically from right to left, there are four

columns. The first column has images from Moshe, the second column, closer to the ark, has images from Jacob. Moving to the other side of the Ark, the third column has images from Jacob again, and the fourth column has images from Moshe, in perfect and beautiful symmetry.

If my analysis is correct then the designer of the windows has made his or her own explanation of the text in glass.

The Torah shines its light out from the ark. First it lights the windows that describe the tribes as seen by Jacob in Egypt before the crossing of the Sea. But then, beyond those six, it lights the other six tribes as seen by Moshe, just before the deepest prophecy is met as the tribes begin to gather in the Promised Land.

And we, sitting in the Chapel, form the current, third vision of the text in the Ark.

Robert and Amy Pollack have been members of BJ since 1994. He is a Professor at Columbia University; she is an artist. Their current work can be found [here](#).



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