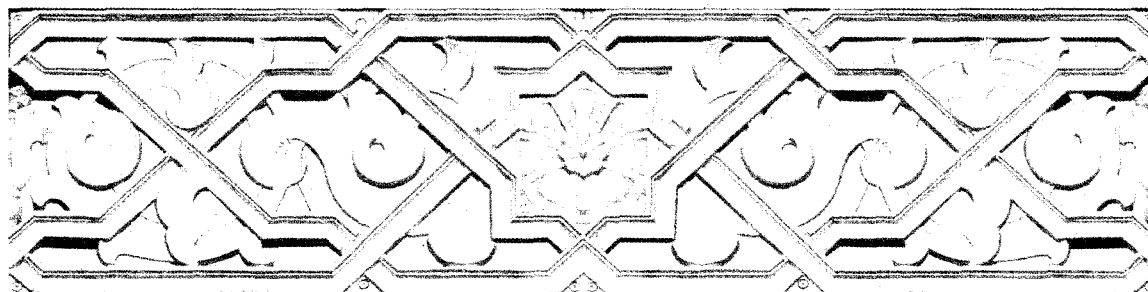


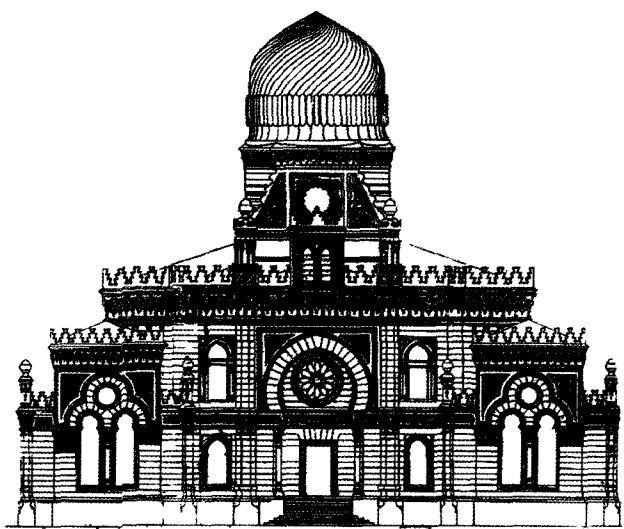
**THE GRAND CHORAL SYNAGOGUE  
IN ST. PETERSBURG**

**БОЛЬШАЯ ХОРАЛЬНАЯ СИНАГОГА  
В САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГЕ**



**С.М. ЯКЕРСОН**

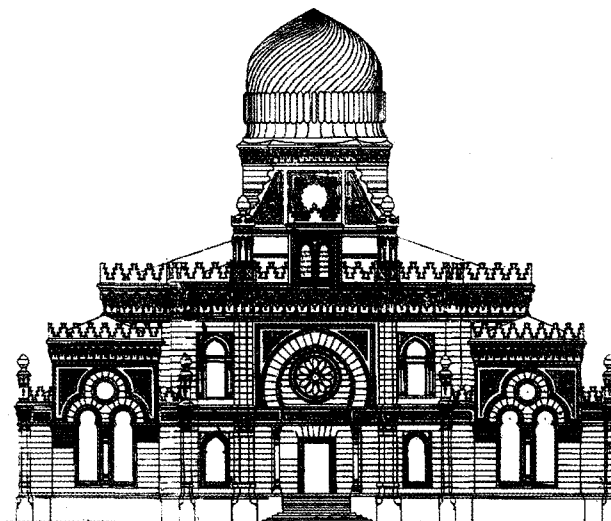
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**Санкт-Петербург  
2006**

**SHIMON M. IAKERSON**

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**St. Petersburg  
2006**

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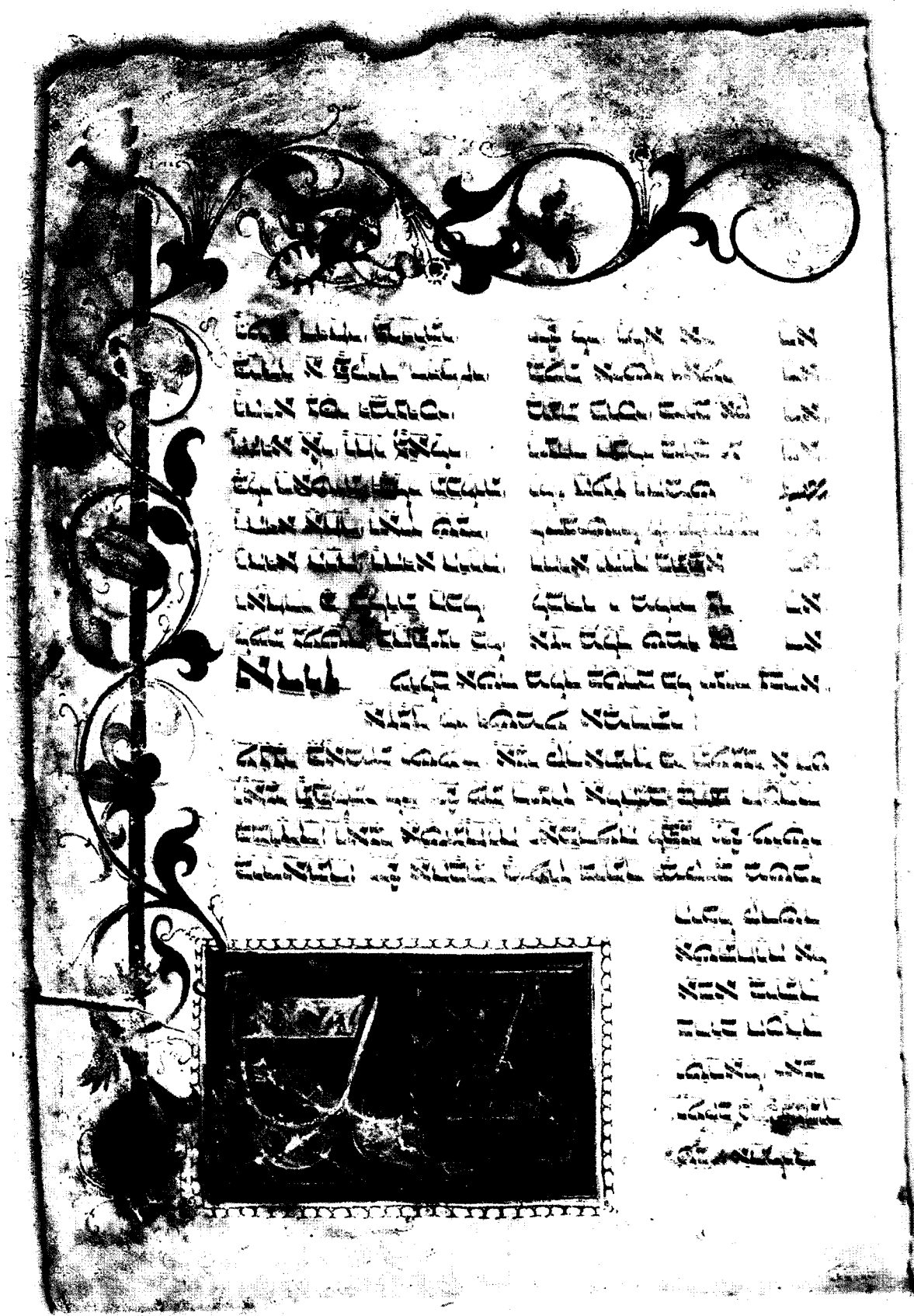
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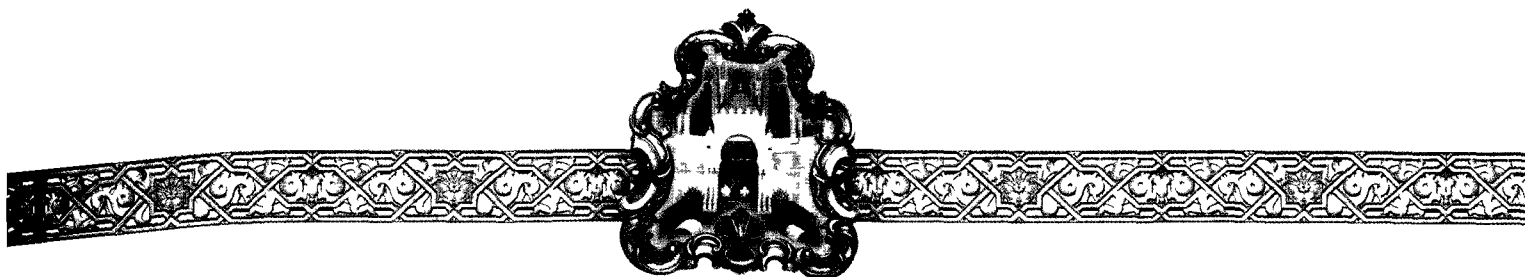
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**The prayer read when entering the synagogue.  
Fol. 1 verso from the Siddur of the Ashkenazi rite. [Germany], 1480.  
The manuscript from the private collection of the Russian Emperor House  
presented to the Imperial Public Library by the Emperor Alexander II in 1861.  
Russian National Library: Евр. н.с. 1.**

**Молитва, читаемая при входе в синагогу.  
л. 1об. Ашкеназский молитвенник [Германия], 1480 г.  
Рукопись из личной библиотеки императорского дома Романовых. Была передана  
в Императорскую публичную библиотеку Александром II в 1861.  
Российская национальная библиотека: Евр. н.с. 1.**



How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, your habitations, O Israel!  
By thy abundant grace I enter thy house; I worship before thy holy  
shrine with reverence. O Lord, I love thy abode, the place where thy  
glory dwells. I will worship and bow down; I will bend the knee before  
the Lord my Maker. I offer my prayer to thee, O Lord, at a time of  
grace. O God, in thy abundant kindness, answer me with thy saving  
truth.

(From a prayer read when entering the synagogue)

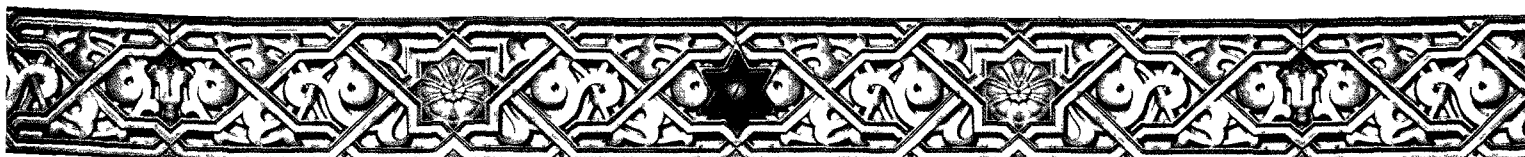
«Clearly where there is a need for six tabernacles it is time to  
think about building a separate temple that would gather all believers  
there at its celebrations in a space that is large and suitably deco-  
rated. The spirit of the age, which has changed for the better, the  
example of the rest of Europe, the clear view of the powers that do  
not allow us to doubt for a moment that no one will now prohibit our  
Jews from worshipping the Grand Lord in all solemnity...»

(Vladimir Stasov<sup>2</sup>)

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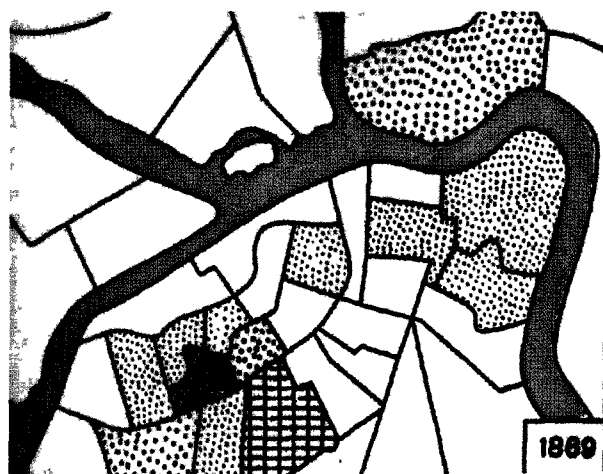
<sup>1</sup> Numbers 24:5; Psalms 5:8; 26:8; 95:6; 69:14. -

<sup>2</sup> V.V. Stasov. Po povodu postroiki sinagogi v Sankt-Peterburge (On the Building of a Synagogue in St. Petersburg), *Evreiskaya biblioteka. Istoriko-Literaturnii sbornik* (Jewish Library. A Cultural-Historical Collection). Vol. II. St. Petersburg, 1872, p. 453 (in Russian).

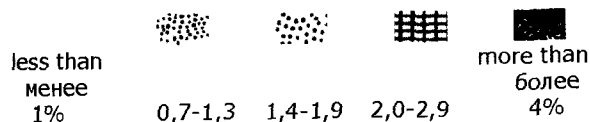




## INTRODUCTION



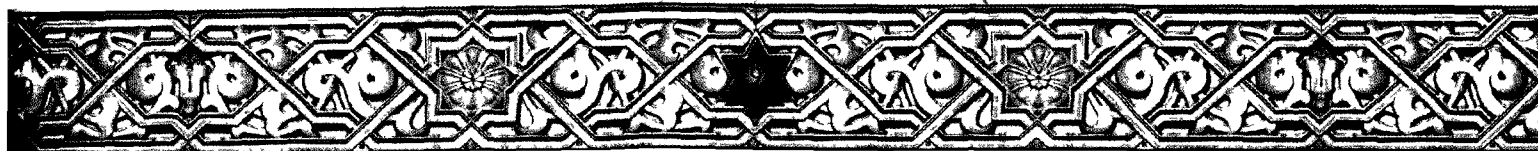
A map of Jews settling in the city areas in 1868.  
Карта расселения евреев по частям города на 1868 г.



The year 1869 is known in Russian history for the intensive preparations for extensive local government reform initiated by Emperor Alexander II (ruled 1855-1881). The reform introduced a new classless system of electing members to the local legislature (duma) who, in turn, elected its chairman. The дума became responsible for matters of town transport, education, the health system, lighting, food provisions, etc. All of this caused cities to grow considerably and the conditions of daily life were improved for all groups of the population. The local government reform was truly one of the most significant socio-political reforms of its time. The same year, 1869, is famous for another quite unusual event that certainly marked a milestone in the history of Russian Judaism. Finally the capital's Jewish population was rewarded for its many years of hard work: on October 1 Alexander II signed a resolution of the Committee of Ministers allowing the Jews of St. Petersburg to build the Grand Choral Synagogue to replace the existing tabernacles.

In this way the Jewish community gained legitimate status in the capital, and the Jewish community was recognized as an integral and permanently existing part of the city's population.

By that time in history there had been Jews living in the city for a little over a century. Without delving too far into Russian history of the late 18th century we can say that due to the policies of Catherine II (ruled 1762-1796) the borders of the empire were expanded considerably. As a result of the annexation of the Crimea (1783), Lithuania, Poland and Volhynia (1793-95), together with the new territories Russia acquired a large number of Jews. The Jews were entitled to live where they had been living, although they were prohibited from migrating to the so-called «inner guberniyas.» However, the new Russian subjects would visit the capital on business. A special commission was created to regulate the supervision of Russia's Jews. Deputies from Jewish societies were involved in the work of the commission. Those deputies also took up residence







THE GRAND CHORAL SYNAGOGUE IN ST. PETERSBURG

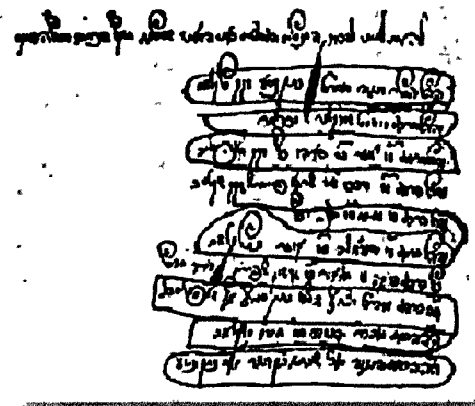


- Abram Peretz, one of the first leaders of the Jewish community.
- Абрам Перец, один из первых лидеров общины.

in the capital. Thus by the end of the 1780s St. Petersburg had a small but full-blooded Jewish community. It was made up of Jewish deputies led by the Belarus merchants Abram Peretz<sup>3</sup> and Nota Notkin\*. They were accompanied by their family members and Jewish servants. This small community met in the house where Peretz lived, on the corner of Nevsky Prospect and Bolshaya Morskaya Street. In 1802 a plot of land was purchased to serve as a Jewish cemetery (in the Lutheran part of the Volkov Cemetery) and the first community's record book, or pinkas, was es-

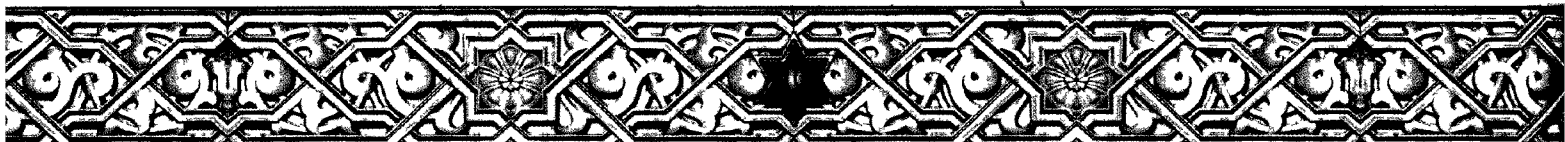
tablished. This is accepted as the de facto appearance of the Jewish community in St. Petersburg. Jews began to be recruited for the Russian army in 1828 and St. Petersburg had a number of Jewish soldiers. The law allowed their wives and children to live with them. Thus small soldiers' communities arose. At first Jewish prayer meetings were organized in the barracks. Later, at the commanders' insistence, Jewish soldiers had to rent special rooms outside the barracks. This is how the tabernacles came about.

**I**n addition to servicemen and their families, St. Petersburg was also home to Jews involved in government supply and procurement or those who had come to engage in court cases. In the mid-1850s retired Jewish soldiers and their families were allowed to stay in St. Petersburg after leaving the service. Gradually other groups of Jews also acquired the right to reside in the capital, starting with the 1st guild merchants, then Jewish craftsmen and eventually all Jews with a higher education. The Jewish population in the capital grew rapidly.



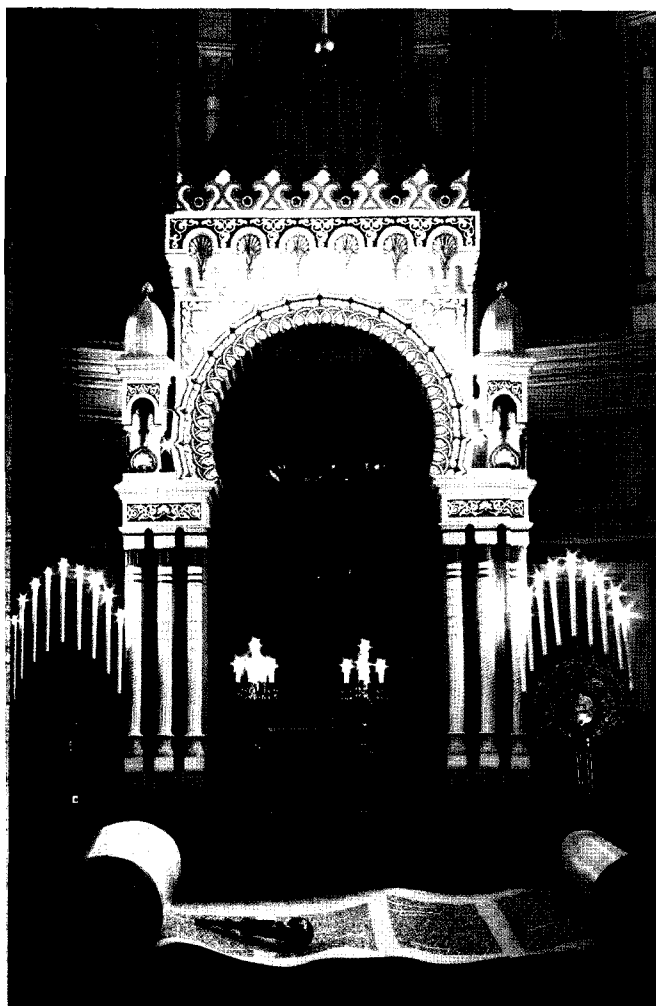
- Record in the first community pinkas.
- Запись в первой общинной книге.

<sup>3</sup> See Personalia at the end of this article for names marked with an asterisk (\*).





THE GRAND CHORAL SYNAGOGUE IN ST. PETERSBURG



- Ark of the Covenant and Bimah with a Torah scroll.
- Ковчег Завета и Бима со свитком Торы.

By 1869 according to official data there were 6,654 Jews permanently residing in the city, accounting for 1% of the entire population of the capital. Thus the construction of a large synagogue was not only dictated by the needs of the city's Jewish community, but also became a confirmation of their legal status and accepted social standing in the capital of the Russian Empire. More importantly, the construction gave Russian Jews and especially the leadership of the St. Petersburg community a hope of achieving civil equality for Jews in Russia.

The permission to build a synagogue met the expectations of the city's Jewish population and also approval with the more progressive members of the Russian intelligentsia. But the emperor's signature sealing the legal side of the issue was only a start for the years of work it would take to bring the dream to life.

