

Ways of thinking about Touro Synagogue

Touro Synagogue is an active, living congregation. In this sense, it is like the Redwood Library, which is still performing something very much like the function it had when it was built, but unlike the mansions, which are a kind of relic of a way of life that no longer exists.

Touro Synagogue is also an icon and a symbol of liberty of conscience that draws people from around the region, around the country, and around the world. As such, it represents an idea and a set of values that are important and interesting and still evolving, an idea and a set of values whose meaning is still emerging.

Touro Synagogue is also, of course, historic, not just because George Washington wrote his famous letter but because it was the scene of and in the midst of historic events and significant—and intriguing—personalities.

Touro Synagogue is also a key landmark in the history of Newport as a town, particularly in the 18th Century, but not just then.

Touro Synagogue is also critical to understanding Newport's special character, not just in the past but now. It is and was, after all, situated right in the center of what is now called Newport's Old Quarter, at the heart of the town's economic, social, cultural, and spiritual life, from the mid-18th century up to the present, nearly a quarter a millennium.

In some ways, too, Touro Synagogue is Newport's most prominent structure from that period and an outstanding and vivid example of the preservation ethic at work and a demonstration of the outcome of the preservation process at its best. For one thing, Touro Synagogue looks in almost every respect, except its roof and painted exterior, like the building Peter Harrison designed and built; nothing has been added and there have no significant structural modifications. Secondly, Touro Synagogue has inspired three major restoration projects over the course of the last century, the most recent having taken place in this decade. It is, therefore, visible testimony to the ways in which the past matters to us and in which we define ourselves by our relationship to the past.

Touro Synagogue speaks to the past in many ways, for example as a touchstone for talking and thinking about the history—the travails and the triumphs—of world Jewry and for delving into the cultural traditions and belief systems, the commonalities and differences within Judaism, the languages, the literature, the music, the customs, the relationships.

And Touro Synagogue is very beautiful, from its understated elegant exterior, unusual siting, and appealing architectural grace notes to its intricate interior, amazing acoustics, serene spaces, and gleaming surfaces.

And Touro Synagogue is a place of worship and reflection, both for Congregation Jeshuat Israel and for tens of thousands of visitors from around the world every year. It is a touchstone for

thousands of stories, many embedded in the site itself and those who have worshipped and visited it over the centuries, and others carried to it by the wide range of visitors from difficult countries and cultures who visit it now.