

REIMAGINING SHABBAT

IT IS TIME FOR US TO APPROACH SHABBAT WITH CREATIVITY, EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF “REST” AND DEFINING “WORK” IN NEW WAYS.

BY ERIC H. YOFFIE

More than a dozen years ago, we began a Movement-wide conversation about worship. Focusing our attention on Friday evening, we set out to create heartfelt, inspiring, and community-building worship services. And we succeeded. In a mere handful of years, our erev Shabbat services have been radically transformed from somber to joyful, from passive to engaging. On erev Shabbat our synagogues are often overflowing, our worship abounding in celebration and song. And for the first time, many of our members have opened themselves to the music, poetry, and passion of heartfelt prayer.



Still, we had hoped that some worshippers returning to the synagogue on Friday nights would also be drawn to our Shabbat morning prayer. This has not happened, and we all know one reason why: the character of the Shabbat morning service. With morning worship regularly appropriated by bar and bat mitzvah families, members who come to pray often sit in the back of the sanctuary and feel like interlopers in their own congregation. On erev Shabbat, we invite our members in, but on Shabbat morning, we drive them away.

These are serious matters. If we allow our services to be privatized; if we give up ownership of Shabbat and of our own sanctuaries; if communal celebration gives

The results are tragic. We lose young families whose children cannot stay up late on Friday. We lose seniors, who prefer to pray on Shabbat day to avoid nighttime driving. We lose those Jews who wish to recite *Kaddish*, and those who are simply looking to join their community in prayer.

And we are also sending the wrong message about bar mitzvah.

Bar mitzvah is the occasion, symbolically at least, when a young person joins an adult community of Jews. But you cannot join what does not exist—a regular community of worshippers who would be best suited to mentor the young adult. Instead, what you find at a typical bar mitzvah is a one-time assemblage of well-wishers with nothing in common but an invitation.

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way to a bar mitzvah performance—if all these things happen, how can we remain the dynamic Movement we have become?

MMy concerns are broadly shared. I have spoken to hundreds of rabbis and cantors who overwhelmingly express dissatisfaction with the status quo of Shabbat morning prayer.

They are worried. The bar mitzvah, like other significant moments in Jewish life, is meant to occur within the context of an open and caring community. But many synagogue members now feel they are entitled to a private, individual bar mitzvah. This means that what should be public and inclusive has become private and exclusive, the focus more on the child than on the community. We in the congregation have become voyeurs rather than *daveners*; and feeling uncomfortable, we stay away.

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And worst of all: absent a knowledgeable congregation, worship of God gives way to worship of the child—and self-serving worship is a contradiction in terms. Rabbis, cantors, educators, and presidents have all told me how painful it is to sit in a service where the child is the star and the theme is “Steven Schwartz, King for a Day” or “Sarah Goldstein, Queen for a Day.” Inevitably, this leads to speeches in which every boy or girl is smarter than Einstein, a better soccer player than Mia Hamm, a more brilliant computer whiz than Bill Gates, and a greater activist than Bono.

There is something profoundly wrong when hundreds and hundreds of people attend bar and bat mitzvahs every Shabbat in Reform congregations, but rarely does anyone leave saying: “That was so spiritually fulfilling, I can’t wait to come back next week.”

True, many congregations have created Shabbat morning experiences centering on Torah study, or offer alternative *minyanim* that serve a small but committed core. These are important and welcome, but the majority of our synagogues have given up hope of ever having a regu-

lar congregational worship experience on Shabbat morning.

The time has come to say: If it’s not working, let’s not do it anymore. The time has come to try new things.

TThis will not be easy. The current system has many virtues. When I ask members of our congregations what was their most meaningful experience in the synagogue, very often the answer is: the bar mitzvah of my child. Many join the congregation precisely because they hunger for the ritual of bar mitzvah, which is their means of publicly declaring their desire to be counted as Jews. Neither should we forget the serious study in which our children engage; educational expectations for bar mitzvah parents to their children expressing publicly, perhaps for the last time, their love for and pride in their child.

Nonetheless, the answer is not more of the same. The best answer is an integrated service—a service in which the child joins the congregation and the congregation does not merely watch the child; a service in which the child’s obligation is not to perform, but to lead the congregation in prayer; a service in which parents are encouraged to reshape their speeches as blessings; a service, in short, that remains truly meaningful for the bar mitzvah family without feeling like a private family event. The answer is public, communal worship that all of us want to attend.

Can we do this? Of course we can. A number of our most creative synagogues are already changing their worship patterns. Temple Beth Am of Seattle offers Shabbat morning prayer that brings together the bar mitzvah family and regular worshippers, makes room for congregational Torah readers and *aliyot*, and gives the child a special and honored but still limited role as service leader. And in cases where an integrated service is not possible, new approaches to alternative worship are engaging far more than a handful of committed members. At B’nai Israel in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a service at 8 AM draws a significant number of regular worship-



our friends the undivided attention they did not receive the rest of the week. On Shabbat we speak to our children of their hopes and dreams. We show them that we value them for who they are and not for the grades they get or the prizes they win. During the week we pursue our goals; on Shabbat we learn simply to be.

What, then, does it mean to make Shabbat observance a regular practice? For most of us, it will *not* mean some kind of neo-*frumkeit*; it will *not* mean the Shabbat of 18th-century Europe; it will *not* mean an endless list of Shabbat prohibitions. We fled that kind of Shabbat, and for good reason.

It *will* mean approaching Shabbat with the creativity that has always distinguished Reform Judaism. It *will* mean emphasizing the “Thou shalt’s” of Shabbat—candles and *Kiddush*, rest and study, prayer and community. It *will* mean expanding our understanding of rest, and defining in new ways what is, and is not, work. It *will* mean observing Shabbat as a loving community in which we feel commanded without feeling coerced.

To start this process, we have compiled fifty-two suggestions—one for each week of the year—on creative ways to celebrate Shabbat as a special and holy day (see www.urj.org/Shabbat).

pers, including older people, parents with children in soccer uniforms, and merchants who open their stores at 10 o’clock.

This discussion is part of something larger—and that is a readiness to look seriously at the broader question of Shabbat observance. Our surveys show there is a new openness to the commandment to observe a weekly day of rest—even among those who never attend services.

Why is this happening?

Because we now understand that Shabbat was always central to Reform Judaism. Because we know, in our hearts, that in the absence of Shabbat, Judaism withers. And most important of all, because Reform Jews need Shabbat.

In our 24/7 culture, the boundary between work time and leisure time has been swept away, and the results are devastating. Do we really want to live in a world where we make love in half the time and cook every meal in the microwave? When work expands to fill all our evenings and weekends, everything suffers, including our health. Families take the worst hit. The average parent spends twice as long dealing with email as play-

ing with his children.

For our stressed-out, sleep-deprived families, the Torah’s mandate to rest is relevant and sensible. Our tradition does not instruct us to stop working altogether on Shabbat; after all, it also takes effort to study, pray, and go to synagogue. But we are asked to abstain from the work we do to earn a living, and instead to reflect, to

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enjoy, to take a stroll through the neighborhood. We are asked to put aside those Blackberries and stop gathering information, just as the ancient Israelites stopped gathering wood. We are asked to stop running around long enough to see what God is doing.

And this most of all: On Shabbat, whether in synagogue or at home, we are asked to give our kids, our spouse, and

We don’t have all the answers, and there will be no single answer, no one-size-fits-all program. Our diverse Movement has many groups, and they will require different solutions. We have no intention of legislating personal observance for our members, and if we did, they wouldn’t listen anyway. I know that because I have struggled with issues of Shabbat observance most of my life, I

change my practice with some frequency, and I insist on my right both to change my mind and to make my own decisions.

Nonetheless, my personal goal is to define a regular pattern of observance comfortable for me as a Reform Jew, and I welcome the input of others who are engaged in a similar struggle.

What I am proposing, therefore, is the following: Let us work on this together as a Movement, with the clear understanding that there will be no dictates from above. Let us turn to our congregations and our most committed members, and ask them to

generate answers from all Reform Jews.

Specifically, I am asking our congregational leaders to do two things.

First, appoint a Shabbat Morning Task Force consisting of ten to fifteen members who agree to meet weekly for eight weeks. This Task Force will worship on Shabbat morning in the synagogue for four weeks, will attend Shabbat morning services in two other area congregations, and will also study Jewish sources about Shabbat. To assist them, the Union has prepared a Shabbat study guide and a manual describing the creative ways that synagogues

throughout North America are thinking about engaging in Shabbat morning prayer. After discussion and further study, each Task Force will present to the synagogue and to the Movement recommendations as to how Shabbat morning services might be reimagined and enhanced.

Second, select a Shabbat Chavurah consisting of eight to twelve people who will both study about Shabbat and actively observe it over a period of three to four months. This program of Shabbat immersion will offer the opportunity to be Shabbat observant in an authentically Reform way. At times these individuals will come together for study, rituals, and community; at other times they will observe within their families. Here, too, we have prepared materials to guide them. As a Movement, our hope is to learn from them as they share their experiences—what they've chosen to do and not to do on Shabbat afternoon, and what they have learned as a result. Let us see how their beliefs about God, Covenant, and the Jewish people evolve. Let us see what kind of help they need from their synagogues and their Movement.

We have created two Listservs, one for Task Force members and one for Chavurah members, so they may exchange ideas with one another. Two years from now, at the Toronto Biennial, we will honor all participants and invite both congregations and individuals to share their stories. We have also started a Shabbat blog so that every member of a Reform synagogue can be part of this discussion.

As Reform Jews we will approach Shabbat in our own way and refashion it for the modern world. But approach it we must. As Arnold Jacob Wolfe has reminded us, Shabbat is not in Heaven or beyond the sea. It is part of the Divine agenda and a taste of eternity, but also wholly human and humane. Without Shabbat we may be lost; in its rediscovery, we may yet be found. □

CLIMBING THE NEXT SHABBAT STEPS

Visit www.urj.org/Shabbat. You'll discover resources and links for all of Rabbi Eric Yoffie's Shabbat initiatives, creative Shabbat ideas, and much more.