

Introduction

At the December 2007 URJ Biennial, Rabbi Eric Yoffie electrified the attendees with a bold proposal for a Shabbat Initiative to examine (1) how we can make Shabbat morning worship a more vital part of our congregational life, and (2) how we can make the broad notion of Shabbat, as a day of rest and revitalization, more meaningful in our lives (see attachment). He challenged congregations to examine these issues and share ideas. Rabbi Yoffie was not suggesting that Shabbat morning observance would replace Erev Shabbat as the cornerstone of the Reform worship experience. He acknowledged an increasing need among Reform Jews to observe Shabbat beyond Friday night and the experience many had that the b'nei mitzvah service often felt limited to the friends and family of the bar/bat mitzvah.

In response, Temple Sinai created a Shabbat Initiative group led by Rabbi Mates-Muchin, Dan Fendel, and Valerie Sopher, and consisting of 20 or so interested congregants, from a variety of backgrounds, including parents of recent b'nei mitzvah, Shabbat Minyan lay leaders, and regular Shabbat morning worshipers. (A list of participants is attached.) The group was generally interested in Shabbat morning services but was not proportionally representative of our congregational community. (The attached "The Method of Work of the Shabbat Initiative Committee" gives more information about our process.)

We responded to Rabbi Yoffie's challenge because it presented us with an opportunity to (1) build community; (2) look at ways the Temple could facilitate congregants' Shabbat observance, both personal and communal; (3) reflect on the worship experience during a time of building and rabbinic transitions in our congregation; and (4) participate in a URJ project.

We chose to work on both components of Rabbi Yoffie's challenge, as described earlier – the "Worship" component, focusing on Shabbat morning prayer, and the "Chavurah" component, looking at the broader notion of Shabbat as a day of rest.

This report primarily discusses our work in the dimension of Shabbat morning worship. A separate document identifies our recommendations on the Chavurah component.

As we began our exploration, we felt that we were coming from a position of strength with our three Shabbat morning service models: services that include a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony; occasional clergy-lead “chapel” service when no bar/bat mitzvah is scheduled (we refer to this as a “chapel” service because it was usually held in the Harpham Chapel, while that still existed); and monthly lay-led Shabbat Minyan (“alternate”) service.

Our objectives.

We defined our objectives as follows:

- To foster/facilitate/encourage/support/promote awareness of both personal and communal Shabbat observance within our community
- To make our Shabbat morning worship feel more open to our entire Temple Sinai congregation and a community-wide experience
- To support our congregants in their journey to bring Shabbat into their lives
- To bring people to Shabbat—literally to the synagogue on Shabbat morning, and figuratively, to an awareness of Shabbat

Our role.

We viewed our role as advisory. Our discoveries and discussions were meant to frame the issue for ongoing discussion by the clergy, the Ritual Committee, and our community.

Initial Question: Is It Worth It?

There was an initial threshold question: Was there enough interest in Shabbat morning worship at Temple Sinai to make the effort put into the Initiative worthwhile? Or, was Rabbi Yoffie ahead of the curve in suggesting that the Initiative was addressing a growing desire among Reform Jews to observe Shabbat, including Shabbat morning services?

The answer was decidedly “yes” to the first question and “no” to the second for several reasons.

To start, nearly all of the people who were invited to participate in the Initiative readily agreed to do so. They were enthusiastic and committed to the idea. They seriously

undertook the assignments and spent many, many hours on this project.

During the course of the work of the Initiative, we noticed an increase in attendance at Shabbat morning services, which we attribute to a few factors. Some of the Initiative members started coming to services more frequently. A couple of new regulars, who were not part of the Initiative project, started to attend. There are now as many as a dozen or more at any bar/bat mitzvah service.

As it happened, there were five or so Shabbat mornings in November and December 2008 when no bar/bat mitzvah was scheduled. The Ritual Committee decided to host kiddush lunches after these services, and the services were announced to the congregation in the form of an invitation to participate in the kiddush lunch. These services drew more and more people each week, until there were as many as 30 people by the end of this period, about double the typical number of attendees.

Finally, attendance at the Shabbat Minyan, now completing its third year as a lay-led program, has maintained an average of 40-50 people every month and continues to attract new regulars.

Whatever the reasons, there is a sense of a growing community of regular Shabbat morning worshippers.

Our Long-Term Vision: One Community Shabbat Morning Service

One given of our discussion was that, based on our congregation's size and demographics, we will continue to celebrate the bar or bat mitzvah ceremony of one of our young adults on most Shabbat mornings. This fact led us to the natural question of how we should also seek to meet the needs of the growing community of regular Shabbat morning worshippers as well as the needs of other congregants who have expressed interest in Shabbat morning worship but do not regularly attend. We questioned whether we should consider developing special services (such as parallel services for various constituencies, e.g., more frequent lay-led services; family services; Torah study services), or, instead, seek ways to incorporate these needs within the existing services we currently hold.

After looking at our own services and considering the various service models as presented in the URJ's Initiative manual, "*Embracing Shabbat*" (including the "special

services” models just described; see the attached “Notes on various congregational service models”), the group reached a consensus to focus on the ideal of a single community-wide Shabbat morning service every week. We focused on four main themes: build community, increase participation, vary services and educate the community.

We recognized that the single-service model would present a considerable challenge, given the diversity of our congregational community. The objective and challenge of such a model is to create a warm and supportive worship experience in a congregation of nearly 1,000 households. In many respects, this challenge requires us to strike a balance between the desires of those who wish to attend more frequently and the desires and expectations of the b’nei mitzvah families. We must take into account that the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is part of an ongoing educational process that supports our young people in developing and expressing a love of Torah and Judaism and that has a positive impact during an important developmental stage in their lives. Equally important, we endorse the idea that Shabbat Morning service should be a service for the entire congregation, wherein we celebrate and welcome a young adult into our community.

How Do We Get There?

Moving from our existing worship structure to this ideal will take time, thought, hard work, and, in some measure, compromise. It will likely also entail personal growth as the various constituencies come to recognize and appreciate the needs of others within the congregation, and personal values change in response.

The recommendations here were not unanimous. Some of the specific suggestions here simply serve as examples and are not necessarily representative of the whole group. We also want to note that many of the Initiative participants regularly attend the Shabbat Minyan service, and their experience at this service often informed their comments.

Community.

Objective: Create a larger community of Shabbat morning worshipers and build on the sense of community that draws people to services now. Erase the perceived or real divide among the various communities and address the possible perception among some congregants that the service is a “private” event for the bar/bat mitzvah

family.

- Means:*
- (1) Invite congregants to attend services. “Talk up”/ promote/ market Shabbat morning worship.
 - (2) Provide kiddush lunches, even when there is no bar/bat mitzvah, so that sharing a meal and conversation can enhance the sense of community.
 - (3) Encourage b’nei mitzvah students and their parents to attend services during the year preceding the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony (and perhaps afterward as well).
 - (4) Explore ways to bring regular worshipers together with b’nei mitzvah families and the Religious School community in order to promote a larger sense of community and to help these groups develop an increased awareness of each other’s investment in the service.
 - (5) Develop a mentor/buddy system, connecting newcomers and b’nei mitzvah families with regular worshipers.
 - (6) Adjust the physical space to create a more intimate environment (e.g., by roping off sections of the sanctuary and inviting people to sit closer to the front).

Inclusivity.

Objective: Increase community participation in the service. Emphasize that the Shabbat morning service is about community worship rather than only a bar/bat mitzvah service.

- Means:*
- (1) Increase the role of the rabbi (or possibly other adult congregant) in leading the service, possibly including a drash.
 - (2) Look at revising the role of the bar/bat mitzvah in the service in terms of amount of time he or she leads the service.
 - (3) Invite congregants to participate in the service, such as by sharing honors, aliyot, readings, and chanting among congregants and the bar/bat mitzvah family.

- (4) Include more communal singing and chanting of prayers.
- (5) Improve/reduce/eliminate/move parent speeches.
- (6) Consolidate congratulatory messages/presentations.

Variety.

Objective: Develop a flexible service model that may vary depending upon the abilities of the bar or bat mitzvah and the family's wishes, and that will keep the service dynamic and meaningful for congregants who attend regularly.

- Means:*(1) Use a variety of musical instrumentation, including providing rhythm instruments (such as egg shakers) for use by congregants during the service.
- (2) Experiment with use of *Mishkan T'filah*.

Education.

Objective: Develop a community more knowledgeable about the liturgy.

- Means:*(1) Offer programs on prayer, liturgy, and use of *Mishkan T'filah*.
- (2) Use moments during the service, as well as written materials, to educate congregants and guests about the service and the meaning of prayer.
 - (3) Provide support for those interested in leading components of the service, such as classes on Torah and haftarah cantillation.

Conclusion

We hope we have framed the issues in a way that supports an ongoing conversation about Shabbat Morning Worship, and not as a criticism of the current bar/bat mitzvah service model. We recognize the importance of the platform that the bar/bat mitzvah experience presents for young adults in our community to discover and celebrate Judaism as well as the opportunity the service presents for many of us to welcome our b'nei mitzvah into our Temple community as adult members. We embrace and appreciate the recent changes to the service that incorporate the community into the service, such as having a

congregant read the maftir and inviting the Religious School class up to the bimah to sing the closing song and see these changes as integral steps toward building a strong Shabbat Morning Worship community.

We also recognize the challenge this report presents to our clergy, the Ritual Committee, and the Religious School community and see this as the beginning of a process that will continue to take shape for many years to come. We look forward to inviting others to join in this conversation as well, in the hope of building an increasing investment in Shabbat Morning Worship for the community as a whole.

We wish to acknowledge the efforts of all who were involved in this process and thank them for their time and energy. *Todah rabah* and *yasher koach*.

Dan Fendel and Valerie Sopher, Co-Chairs

Rabbi Mates-Muchin, Clergy Advisor

Attachments:

- Relevant portion of Rabbi Yoffie's Biennial address
- List of Shabbat Initiative participants
- "The Method of Work of the Shabbat Initiative Committee" (summary of our process)
- Notes on various congregational service models
- Summary of Shabbat Initiative participants' individual responses to questionnaire on worship goals