

# **Report of the Worship Task Force of Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills February 2001**

## **Background:**

In November of 1999 President Steve Feldstein and Rabbi Janet Marder called a meeting of the congregation to discuss the issue of b'nai mitzvah scheduling. With religious school enrollments projected at up to 90 students in some upcoming grade levels, it was apparent that there would not be enough Shabbat mornings to accommodate each bar or bat mitzvah. Although the congregation had permitted a few Friday evening bar or bat mitzvah services in recent years, the number of Friday nights now needed, combined with the introduction of a very well-received and highly attended kabbalat Shabbat service, made this option less viable for the future. Further, there is a large constituency of regular worshippers within the congregation that finds Friday evening b'nai mitzvah undesirable. The purpose of the meeting was to present this data and to discuss possible solutions to accommodate our growing numbers.

The heated nature of the meeting, attended almost exclusively by bar/bat mitzvah parents, led to several outcomes:

- 1) No changes to the current system would be made immediately.
- 2) The educational/preparation process for becoming bar or bat mitzvah should be studied.
- 3) A task force should be appointed to examine the Shabbat morning worship experience itself.

## **Worship Task Force Charge and Composition**

In December 1999, the Board of Directors charged a Worship Task Force, co-chaired by Rabbi Marder and Susan Wolfe, to "explore ways to make Shabbat morning worship at Beth Am more attractive and inviting to the community." (Minutes of the December 1999 Board Meeting.)

About 25 congregants representing a broad cross-section of the congregation, from seniors to young families to singles to b'nai mitzvah families – both upcoming and recently celebrated -- were invited to serve on the Worship Task Force, which would meet monthly for not more than one year to formulate and articulate its vision for community worship on Shabbat and festival mornings. In addition to demographic diversity, we also sought representation from our various worship communities, including the Saturday morning minyan, Friday evening and Saturday morning sanctuary worshippers, the service of peace and comfort, and the clergy. Of those, the following agreed to participate:

Rabbi Janet Marder, co-chair  
Susan Wolfe, co-chair  
Amy Asin  
Linda Brownstein  
Neill Brownstein  
Rabbi Ken Carr  
Susan Fishman  
Janie Goodman  
Isabel Kaufmann  
Ron Kaye  
Micki Miller  
Keith Raffel  
Carole Robin  
Ron Schilling  
Ilona Shechter  
Anita Steinacher  
Monica Stone  
Ellen Waxman

## **Process**

The first meeting of the Worship Task Force was held on April 18, 2000. At that meeting, the group set its goals as follows:

- Studying
- Visioning
- Formulating recommendations for alterations to the current service
- Educating the congregation
- Developing an implementation plan

These goals would be accomplished through:

- Study among ourselves at each meeting
- Visioning exercises
- Identifying elements of community
- Identifying elements of meaningful community prayer
- Visiting other synagogues and keeping worship diaries of our experiences
- Developing and recommending changes to the service
- Designing an implementation plan.

Rabbi Marder used materials provided by the UAHC as well as our own siddur and other readings to teach the prayers and concepts behind them so that we could develop a better sense of what it means to worship in a community. By way of establishing a common baseline, each member of the task force was asked to attend Beth Am's main Saturday morning service three times within a defined, six-week period, and to record the experiences in worship diaries provided by the UAHC. (See attachments) We felt it was imperative that the task force members know what

currently transpired in the sanctuary on Saturday mornings before beginning to tinker with it.

Our task force has prayed together and led services together. Our group led a summer kabbalat Shabbat service on Aug. 11; we sponsored community Shabbat morning services on Nov. 11 and Jan. 6, when there was no bar or bat mitzvah scheduled. Over the course of the last ten months, task force members have visited congregations throughout the state, the country and the world, keeping worship diaries that note the mood of each service and how it was achieved – whether through music, through prayer, through congregational participation or through silence.

As we studied the background and meaning of the service and its prayers, we used a consensus model to develop a vision of meaningful community worship and a set of guiding principles by which to evaluate suggested changes to Beth Am's worship service.

## **Why Change? Our Burning Platform**

As discussions progressed, it became clear that most of the people who currently attend Shabbat morning services – the b'nai mitzvah families and their invited guests who come to services for a singular occasion and not on an ongoing basis – are mostly satisfied with their experiences. If they are happy and the vast majority of the congregation does not attend, why change?

Through study, service attendance and participation, our task force determined that:

The hunger to feel welcome at Beth Am services on Shabbat morning, and to establish a regular, communal opportunity to recognize and honor the meaningful events in the life of the congregation as well as the lives of its members extends far beyond the b'nai mitzvah families. In addition, the experience of b'nai mitzvah and their families is greatly enhanced by the regular presence of participating members of the congregation to welcome the young man or woman into the community.

After regularly attending Shabbat morning services at Beth Am, our task force members discovered that a consistent and regular Beth Am community generally is not in attendance. With little consistency in the makeup of the congregation from week to week, it is difficult to build the spirit of participation with which we would like to celebrate Shabbat.

We aspire to more.

Moreover, as we attended services ourselves, we discovered that the most meaningful and relevant services were those in which the congregation's community was present and participating.

## **Our Vision**

To create an inclusive, participatory community worship service that provides a Shabbat morning opportunity to connect with Judaism and to experience the spiritual renewal, peace, joy and sense of celebration that Shabbat brings us each week.

## **Guiding Principles**

The overarching principles guiding the recommendations for change include some issues yet to be resolved. We set out to design a Shabbat morning worship experience in which:

- Congregants and invited guests, including everyone from seniors to families with children, feel equally welcome;
- Everyone present participates AND we are not teaching the service anew each week;
- While the primary focus is Shabbat, the b'nai mitzvah families continue to have meaningful experiences that enhance Shabbat for all in attendance;
- Congregational simchas are celebrated;
- We provide opportunities for as many congregants as possible to pray on Shabbat morning AND we do not add more services;
- Congregants have an opportunity to participate both as active worshippers and in leading prayers and reading Torah;
- Music sets a tone that invites full congregational participation;
- Worshippers glean a new perspective or learn something through the service.

## **Recommendations**

Many changes to our morning service already have been implemented. Rabbi Marder has created a new Beth Am siddur for Shabbat and festival mornings. Inaugurated at the adult learning retreat at Asilomar, the new prayerbook includes the same liturgy as the *Gates of Prayer*, interpreted through contemporary translations, punctuated with poems, meditations and observations of renowned Jewish scholars, and including full transliteration of the Hebrew prayers. Cantor Kay Greenwald has developed a combination of new and traditional melodies to enhance the mood and meaning of the service. Congregants are beginning to lead prayers in Hebrew and in English.

In order to create an atmosphere that is welcoming to all worshippers, whether they are part of the morning's bar/bat mitzvah or not, the task force further recommends:

- A regular Saturday morning Shabbat service whether or not a bar or bat mitzvah is scheduled;
- Greeters in the foyer as people arrive for services;
- Piano music before the start of the service, as worshippers enter the sanctuary;
- Piano and guitar accompaniment, not organ;
- Starting the service with the congregation singing together;
- Giving the board member something specific to *do* – welcome the congregation at the beginning of the service and read the Prayer for the Congregation;
- Congregants in addition to the b'nai mitzvah and their families leading Hebrew and English prayers. This will both allow participation and create opportunities for reading Hebrew;
- Congregant Torah readers and congregant aliyot in addition to the b'nai mitzvah and their family members. We especially want to honor those who are celebrating a simcha or a milestone;
- A sermon with challenging content;
- Altering the style and setting of the parents' blessings for the bar/bat mitzvah to reflect the religious heritage being passed from one generation to the next in the presence of the open ark, while the bar/bat mitzvah is holding the Torah;
- Asking all speakers at the bar/bat mitzvah to give remarks consistent with the nature and meaning of the Shabbat service.
- Creating new guidelines for bar/bat mitzvah d'verei torah, emphasizing the content of the parsha. We suggest that thank-yous are most appropriate as part of the celebration, and not part of the service.
- A congregational kiddush lunch.

## **Issues to be resolved include:**

- How to implement the congregational kiddush lunch (we suggest creating a kiddush lunch subcommittee composed of members of our task force and the b'nai mitzvah task force, the executive director and the senior rabbi or her designate from the professional team);
- How to prepare and include congregants as Torah and Haftarah readers;
- Whether the bima area can be reconfigured to create a closer, more intimate setting in which to worship, and if so, at what cost. This might best be accomplished when the handicap access to the bima is constructed.

## **Conclusion**

We are well on our way to realizing our collective vision of a welcoming and participatory service that blends creative and traditional prayer with music that is both serene and joyful. Already, members of our congregation are participating in the service by chanting Torah and Haftarah and leading Hebrew and English readings.

We are committed to ensuring that every Saturday morning service at Beth Am will have the warm, inclusive appeal of our community Shabbat morning services, providing a meaningful and relevant worship experience week after week after week. The prayerbook, the components of the service, the prayers and songs will be the same as we go forward.

Thus, the biggest variable in the worship experience becomes who is present, and who participates. Herein lies the congregation's major challenge.

We realize that there are psychological and practical obstacles to Saturday morning service attendance, ranging from children's activities and other scheduling conflicts to the Reform movement's focus on Friday evening worship. Some congregants have expressed that they feel they do not belong in the sanctuary unless they have been invited by the bar/bat mitzvah family.

Our community Shabbat morning services have demonstrated that our congregants *can* come to services on Saturday morning. How to alter their worship habits so that they *will* come is the challenge our congregation faces in the future.

## **Moving Forward**

This report addresses the specific charge handed to the task force by the board in December of 1999. The attached communications plan outlines how the task force will help convey the changes and the reasons for change. We recommend that a special, concerted effort be made to communicate with upcoming b'nai mitzvah families.

Cultural change is a long-term process: It would be unrealistic to think that we could change the worship habits of our congregants in 10 months time. In the course of our conversations over the last 10 months, we have had the opportunity to discuss related issues which we believe are of tantamount importance as the congregation's worship transformation effort moves forward. While our work as a task force is complete, the work of creating meaningful and broadly participatory Shabbat morning worship experiences must be embraced by the board and its standing committees if we are to be successful.

Therefore, though not within our formal charge, we further recommend that the Board:

- Engage standing committees to continue the work we have started. Specifically, we recommend that:
  - Religious Practices act as a consultative body to the professional team as further adjustments to our services evolve, and coordinate the leading of prayers and readings at Shabbat morning services at which there is no bar or bat mitzvah;
  - Community Committee coordinate kiddush lunches when there is no bar or bat mitzvah, until a regular congregational kiddush lunch can be implemented;
  - Communications Committee address the ongoing task of increasing congregant attendance on Shabbat mornings, through strategic marketing and communications efforts.

Some ideas we offer to advance the development of a worship community on Shabbat morning include:

- Asking 200 members, including all board members, to commit to coming to Shabbat morning services at least once a month for six months;
- Integrating worship into our educational programming. Specifically:
  - Encouraging student attendance as part of Beth Am's religious education, perhaps including class field trips to services;
  - Encouraging and teaching about Shabbat morning worship;
  - Aliyot for class groups;
  - Inviting post b'nai mitzvah students to read Torah at future services;
  - Occasional Shabbat afternoon study sessions following services;

- Offering classes on the history and meaning of the service and its prayers.
- Providing a CD of the Shabbat morning melodies.