

## **The Second Reform Worship Revolution**

### **“Prayer that Seduces Your Soul and Electrifies Your Heart”**

For Rosh Hashanah Morning

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Temple Sinai

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On this Rosh Hashanah morning, we have once again read from the Torah scroll the famous story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac. I recently discovered a new midrash that sheds great light on this biblical story...

And it came to pass after these things that God did test Abraham. And God said to him, “Take your computer, your old computer, your beloved 286, and install upon it a new operating system, Windows 98, which I will show to you.”

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, just as God had commanded. He loaded his computer, his old computer, his beloved 286 on the donkey.

And with his son Isaac and two of his servants, Abraham went to the place where god had told him, there to find Windows 98. And then, on the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw Windows 98 from afar. Abraham said to his two servants, “you stay here with the Donkey. Isaac and I will go up and load Windows 98 on our 286 and come back to you.”

So Abraham took his computer, his old computer, his beloved 286 and laid it on the back of Isaac his son. And both of them walked up the mountain together.

Then Isaac spoke to Abraham his father saying, “Father, Windows 98 requires far more memory than a 286. How will it possibly run on your machine?”

Abraham looked at his son with love. He slowly shook his head and with perfect faith in the Almighty, he said to Isaac, “Fear not, my son. God will provide the RAM.”

As you know, Temple Sinai was recently accepted to participate with 14 other Reform congregations in the latest cohort of the Synagogue 2000 project. Synagogue 2000 is a

transdenominational think-tank that loves synagogues, believes in the work of the synagogue, and whose mission is to help synagogues better realize their own unique ideals. With the resources of Synagogue 2000 to guide us, Temple Sinai is about to embark upon an incredible three year journey of institutional reflection, self-assessment, and renewal.

Our 20 member Synagogue 2000 committee, now in formation, will delve into every area of synagogue life. The S2K committee is going to take a comprehensive and systematic look at how Temple Sinai “does synagogue” and what, in consonance with our congregations ideals, we might want to do differently in the future. The work of the S2K committee will impact the quality of our synagogue’s life for decades to come. Participating on this committee will be the opportunity to make a decisive difference in this congregation’s history.

If you are intrigued by the work of this committee, and would like to know more about the time commitments expected of all committee members, please give a call to Andrea Wayda or Bruce Stein or Cantor Merel or myself.

On this day, our community charts its course for the new year of 5761. On what should we focus our communal attention? What is our most important task as a spiritual and caring community? The lessons of the history of Reform Judaism teach me that our highest priority needs to be the revitalization of our community worship.

Ponder with me the fact that Reform Judaism originated as a response to the crisis in the prayer life of the German Jewish community of the early 19th century. Greatly frustrated by the medieval style of orthodox prayer, Reform sprung into life as a movement seeking to renew the power and the purpose of worship for a new generation of Jews living in a new world. Our history proves that Reform Jews and Reform Judaism take communal prayer very seriously. It has always been at the top of our spiritual agenda.

So let’s talk now about the revitalization of our community’s worship. My fellow congregants, let’s face it. The current liturgical style of our late Friday night Shabbat service is a dinosaur. You, the majority of the congregants of this congregation, and of most Reform congregations, have declared it dead. You have clearly voted it dead with your disinterest and your non-attendance.

But I am not blaming you. The vote of your feet is clearly indicative of the fact that there is something missing in the way Reform congregations “do” worship. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the president of our Reform movement, acknowledged this in his biennial address last December: “Far too often, our services are tedious, predictable, and dull. Far too often our members pray without fervor or concentration. Far too often, our music is dirge-like and our torah readings lifeless, and we are unable to trigger true emotion and ascent.” Why I see some of you sleeping out there right now!

Did you know that 40% of all Americans attend weekly congregational worship? What would you guess is the percentage within the Jewish community? Weekly Shabbat

services are attended by less than 10% of American Jews! Except for these High Holy Days and several other special occasions throughout the year, our sanctuary is sparsely populated. Where has Reform worship gone wrong? How can it be, Rabbi Yoffie lamented, that the Jews, the authors of the Bible, the poets of the 150 glorious psalms, “could become the least worshipful of peoples in North America?” It is absolutely crucial that we understand the reasons why so many Jews -- why you -- feel dissatisfied with communal prayer. Some answers are not hard to find. When I said that our current liturgical style is a dinosaur, I meant it!

The innovations for which the Reform service is justly well-known--responsive readings, unison prayer in the vernacular, organ, choir, cantorial solo and the rabbinic sermon – are all products from the 19th century! There is no question that this liturgical model worked very well for Reform Jews two hundred years ago. But these approaches no longer resonate for most of us. Two illustrations will suffice to explain why.

Firstly, we live in an era of individualism. But the Reform prayer style we inherited from the 19th century makes no provision for individual expression. We recite our prayers in unison. We rarely provide time for the individual to have a private moment in the midst of the group. We rush through the silent prayer like speed demons. No wonder some of us find the service wanting for this reason. Secondly, most of us connect with God today, if we connect with God at all, through close human relationships and the moments of honesty and acceptance that we share. But the Reform style of sanctuary design that we inherited from the 19th century works against human intimacy. The bimah is oriented to the front. The clergy and all bimah participants are a mile away from you—like right now! How can you feel connected to another human being if all we ever see of each other is the back of our heads? No wonder some of us find the service wanting for this reason.

Two hundred years after the first revolution of Reform Jewish worship against orthodoxy, our liturgical style of Reform worship feels dissonant, incongruent. That one century’s radical innovation becomes another century’s conservative status quo should come as no surprise. The reform is itself now in need of further reform. And this is the thinking behind Rabbi Yoffie’s call last December for a second revolution in Reform Jewish worship. Make no mistake about it. Reform Jews across this country are experiencing a paradigm shift in the way we feel about community prayer. We are in the process of rediscovering prayer’s power and purpose.

New experiments in worship renewal are now Taking place in dozens of reform congregations around the United States. Congregants are responding with enthusiastic support for these new worship initiatives, intrigued by the opportunity to experience a new style of prayer. Most importantly, congregants are showing up in droves, voting “yes” with their feet.

What works for Reform Jews today? What really resonates? What works is a service that engenders true emotion, moving from plateaus of intense joy to valleys of contemplative quiet. What works is a highly participatory prayer experience in which the music and prayer flow together in a harmonious way.

Why is this new worship style working so well? The “draw” of this service is the community itself– the friends, the acquaintances, the new members, the old-time members, the members of all ages and generations who show up to sing together, to lighten each other’s burdens, and to exchange heartfelt hugs at the service’s end. The “draw” of this service is the way you feel when the service is over. You feel full, whole, released. You feel connected to the people with whom you prayed. You feel connected to god. The “draw” of this service is neither the Rabbi’s sermon nor the Cantor’s solo but the service itself: its introspective moments of solitude and peace; the exhilarating moments of joining your voice with the voice of another human being to sing your heart out.

For the first time in many decades of Reform worship, the worship itself is no longer relegated to that of an afterthought, a distant third to the sermon and the solo. The joy of being together as a community, treasuring our time to “delight in each other” While we have each other, is all we need to show up. It is enough. It is more than enough!

Our Temple Sinai has already begun its own first experiment in worship renewal. We call it Kabbalat Shabbat, “Welcoming the Sabbath.” We had our first Kabbalat Shabbat two weeks ago. More than 150 people showed up to experience its possibilities and then enjoyed a community Shabbat dinner masterminded by Arlene Gleicher to whom many thanks are due. I now invite you to be a part of this exciting new approach to communal worship in the months ahead. I truly believe that Shabbat services may become more satisfying to you than ever before, more meaningful to you than you ever thought possible.

Kabbalat Shabbat takes place on Friday nights once a month, mostly at 8pm, but four times a year at 6:30pm, followed by a community Shabbat dinner. Our next Kabbalat Shabbat will be next Friday, October 6, at 8pm. Come and experience Kabbalat Shabbat for yourself. As important as this new paradigm shift in Reform Jewish worship is to revitalizing our community worship, there is still a deep disengagement within the American Jewish community that must be addressed.

One cause of this Jewish disengagement from synagogue life and community worship is the widely-held belief that the synagogue has nothing to do with sustaining or nurturing one’s spiritual core, that place where our deepest feelings, dreams and disappointments reside. Most Jews look outside of temple for their best friends and close human relationships, for their primary community and self-help support groups.

Rabbi Neil Kurshan tells the story of Harry, a Jewish storeowner from the lower east side. Every day he and his cronies met for lunch at the same neighborhood diner. They did this for 25 years. Eventually Harry retired and moved to Florida. As a memento, he brought with him an ashtray from the old diner. And whenever he felt low or his age got to him, he would look at that ashtray and remind himself of all his good buddies and all the good times they shared at the neighborhood diner. With sadness Rabbi Kurshan observes, “It never occurred to Harry to think of his synagogue as one of the places that

got him through the hard times each day.”

This disengagement has reached such a point that some congregants don't even think of their synagogue as a community at all, but as nothing more than any other fee-for-service institution. Those who feel this way do not join a temple to strengthen and be strengthened by the Jewish community -- to give and to receive-- but solely to “get” something out of the community: a bar/bat mitzvah, a wedding, high holy days tickets, the rabbi for a funeral. The commitment to affiliate is measured in terms of cost vs. benefit ratio. Like belonging to a country club, synagogue affiliation boils down to “getting one's money's worth.” It is a totally consumer-oriented point of view. It is unholy. It is unbecoming a Jew.

The success or failure of worship renewal at Temple Sinai, or any congregation, is not just a matter of improving the service or getting more people to believe in God. Paradoxical as it may seem, theology and faith are not the most crucial factors at all. The vitality and vibrancy of community worship is contingent upon the depth of this congregation's caring for one another, on the building of deep human relationships here, nurtured by shared experiences, history, and much time spent together.

The 20th century synagogue was largely built on shallow interpersonal sand. It is no wonder why the congregant-synagogue relationship crumbled so often. It is no surprise why people would not want to come out and pray. The uneasy dissatisfaction that some of us felt growing up in synagogue can be attributed to its superficial atmosphere, its absence of authentic community feeling, and its unreal ambiance-- especially the taboo against expressions of honest emotion.

But we have the choice to make the 21st century synagogue different. Our communal task for the new year of 5761 is to begin to altogether rethink the nature of synagogue community. Above and beyond the payment of dues, fees, and building fund, we need to write a new social contract delineating what we most hope for and need from one another.

The most striking feature of the 21st century concept of synagogue community will be its new atmosphere, the atmosphere of spiritual intimacy. By spiritual intimacy I mean sharing one's struggles with prayer and with God. I also mean sharing our struggles with loss, poor health, aging parents, difficult children, money worries, and keeping our marriages together.

At our annual Selichot program last Saturday night, five members of our congregation helped create just such an atmosphere of spiritual intimacy. Mark and Rob Densen, Rob Mark, Meryl Picard and Louise Wydra courageously agreed to share some of the life lessons they had learned from a cherished parent who had recently passed away. Each of them spoke eloquently and poignantly. They gave to all of us in attendance a great gift of wisdom for the New Year and we are very grateful to them.

Now if you will embrace this concept of spiritual intimacy, our synagogue community

can become for you a source of healing from the hard times, a place to find strength to face sickness, solace after loss, and support to withstand life's inevitable disappointments. If you will embrace Rabbi Larry Hoffman's concept that "life is a sacred pilgrimage and not a tour," our synagogue community can become for you a source of meaning and coherence, binding "your life to eternity" (Rabbi Mark Levin).

This is the place where we live out our Jewish story in community with fellow travelers on the same journey. This is the place where our personal life stories intersect with our "sacred people's sacred odyssey" to complete the work of creation. This place can be your spiritual home.

"Abie and Sadie had worked for years in the shmata business. Finally, they made it big, very big, and to get a little legitimacy they give a big gift to the local orchestra. As a thank you for their contribution they are invited to a very fancy schmancy dinner party.

At the party, Sadie looks around for an entrée to this most impressive crowd. Hearing a group of ladies discussing Beethoven, she senses her chance. "Beethoven?" She says, "Heppens I know him very well. In fact, just the udder day I saw him on the number five bus going to the beach."

There is a hushed silence. Everyone is embarrassed by Sadie's faux pax. Abie feels utterly humiliated. Back in the car, on the way home, Abie says to Sadie, "Vat's the matter vit you? You couldn't sit quiet like a duchess? You had to open your big mouth? Everybody knows the number five bus doesn't go to the beach!"

Like Abie, we have long misdiagnosed the causes of our own disaffection from community worship and synagogue life. For your own enrichment and for the enrichment your involvement would bring to our community, won't you give this synagogue a chance to be important to you? As important to your life as the diner was to Harry's.

This community's foremost concern ought to be the revitalization of our community's worship and the embrace of spiritual intimacy. Wouldn't all of us love to have experiences of prayer that "seduces your heart and electrifies your soul"? Wouldn't all of us love to see the disengaged members of this synagogue re-engage with our spiritual and caring community?

Community worship is the way we connect our personal life story with the life story of the Jewish people. Community worship is the way we discover the values we hold dear and translate them into action. Community worship is the way we open ourselves to a power greater than ourselves; it is our portal into the mind of God. Community worship is the way we discover our deepest selves and remind ourselves that we do live at the edge of mystery.

Through our love for community, this congregation has rediscovered its need for genuine communal prayer. And through our need for communal prayer, this congregation has rediscovered its love for genuine community.