

# JSEC Ritual Task Force – April 6, 2021

The Ritual Task Force, appointed by the JSEC Committee, met for a series of nine (9) Zoom meetings from February 2, 2021 to April 6, 2021. What follows is a summary of the discussions and deliberations of our journey through the ritual practices of Congregation B'nai Israel (CBI) and Beth Shalom Synagogue (BSS).

## Shabbat

During our Ritual Task Force discussions regarding *Shabbat* liturgy, it became apparent that there will be a need for a unified prayer book; and yet there was a clear recognition of the necessity for service diversity to best meet the prayerful needs of all congregants. While the "*Mishkan*" prayer book series was advanced as the main source for *Shabbat*, High Holy Day, and other Holiday services; it was also recognized that the Union Prayer Book was still a cherished source for spiritual inspiration for some congregants on Friday Evening *Shabbat* services as well.

Of note, there was a discussion regarding the merits of one service versus two when offering a Union Prayerbook *Shabbat* Service; of which 3 of 12 members of the taskforce voiced support for having two separate *Shabbat* services. It was determined that our ultimate vision would be to designate a single spiritual text that would help to avoid the concept of "which night do I belong on or which service is mine?"; however, to best meet the needs of all congregants initially, some variability of service would be necessary. A comfortable balance of Hebrew and English in the services is recommended; however this will depend upon the Rabbi's awareness of the congregants and their understanding of and desire for Hebrew readings. It was recognized that as the Rabbi grows familiar with the members, that he/she/they would come to know how to best lead a service based upon knowing the congregational audience.

To best interweave the Divine within the Congregation, there was support for a pre-neg (or in the case of some special celebrations, an *Oneg*). It was also felt that the new congregation should strive to hold only one *Erev Shabbat* service and only one *Shabbat* morning service. Limiting the number of *Shabbat* services offered, would provide a greater opportunity for fellowship and the chance to meet one another. Services should be limited to a single, 60-minute Friday evening *Shabbat* service and 90-minute Saturday morning *Shabbat* service (with some flexibility based upon life cycle events or holidays).

All agreed that musical accompaniment can enhance *Shabbat* services. Insofar as the musical instrumentation, all agreed that piano and/or guitar greatly enhance the worship experience. Furthermore it was concluded that other instrumentation (stringed instruments, woodwinds and other orchestral instruments) could also be appropriate. However in specifically discussing the use of an organ, it was felt that an organ would be less desirable.

In our discussions regarding a cantor or cantorial soloist, it was felt that we should invest in local talent within the synagogue to meet our weekly *Shabbat* musical needs, while utilizing a cantor or cantorial soloist for the High Holidays.

It was clear that familiar prayers and melodies are both important to the worship experience, while additional exposure to new prayers and melodies can also enhance worship as well. It is once again recognized that as the Rabbi gets to know the congregants, he/she/they will know how to balance both the familiar and the introduction of new musical elements into the service.

Our discussions were held acknowledging and respecting that there are *Halachic* (religious) decisions or opinions that are solely within Rabbinic authority and outside of the scope and responsibility of the JSEC Ritual Task Force.

Considerable time was spent examining the details of each congregation's *Shabbat* morning practices — both *Torah Study & Shabbat* morning services (including *Torah* reading/chanting). The minhag of both congregations is a bit different.

Historically, CBI's *Shabbat* morning service tends to be more conversational & personal, focusing on the relevance of *Torah* to our lives; while in contrast, BSS *Torah* Study uses the foundational *Torah* text & Rabbinic & modern commentaries to engage with the *Torah* portion of the week to glean the *Torah's* teachings & how those teachings can enrich our lives today.

There are also some differences in how these two components of *Shabbat* morning are conducted. In one of the congregations, the *Torah* study is incorporated into the *Shabbat* morning service, in place of the formal chanting of the *Torah* scroll; in the other congregation, the *Torah* study precedes the *Shabbat* morning service.

However it is important to note that both congregations have a *Torah* Study & a *Shabbat* morning service each Saturday. Regardless of the current order of these rituals, each congregation spends between 2.25-2.5 hours on their *Shabbat* morning practices (that include *Shabbat* morning service & *Torah* Study).

The overall similarities in the congregations' *Shabbat* morning practices, will serve as an excellent foundation for which the incoming Rabbi and the congregants can collaborate in finalizing the details of the new congregation's *Shabbat* morning minhag.

## High Holy Day Related Events

***Elul*** - All agreed that during the Hebrew month of *Elul*, traditionally a time for personal reflection and spiritual preparation for the New Year, that Congregation New endeavor to offer a variety of opportunities for congregants' to engage in the act of *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, literally translated as "accounting of the soul."

***Selichot*** - One of the *Elul* milestones, *Selichot*, the Saturday evening service a week prior to *Rosh Hashanah*, is considered important by each legacy congregation. The task force encouraged that a discussion be had and guidance be sought from the new rabbi regarding various options and formats that could be established as part of Congregation New's *Minhag* for *Selichot*.

***Kever Avot v'Imahot* קבר אבות ואמהות** literally “graves of the fathers & mothers” the custom of visiting the graveside of parents or close relatives during the month of *Elul* & praying there. Congregation B’nai Israel has a long-standing *Minhag* of visiting the Jewish Cemetery on the Sunday between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* at approximately 4pm. Beth Shalom Synagogue visits the graves of the “fathers and mothers” on the Sunday prior to *Rosh Hashanah*. Because there will be 2 cemeteries, hence the need for 2 services, it is recommended that maintaining the relative days for *Kever Avot*, remain the same as it would allow adequate time to visit the graves and have a brief prayer service. Because of the longstanding tradition of the timing of *Kever Avot* at each congregation, it is strongly recommended that any change to the current timing be clearly communicated well in advance.

***Tashlich*** - CBI’s *Tashlich* service is usually conducted on the Sunday between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, as part of the religious school experience, involving both students and their parents or caregivers. BSS has observed *Tashlich* on the traditional first day of *Rosh Hashanah* (or on the second day of *Rosh Hashanah* if the first day coincides with Shabbat).

## ***Rosh Hashanah / Yom Kippur - General Considerations***

Entry Practices – Historically neither legacy congregation has required High Holy Day (HHD) tickets for entry into services.

Seating practices - CBI’s HHD seating is first come, first served. Since 2008, BSS has encouraged participation in the HHD Cantorial Fund by offering the option for donors at the levels of \$125/individual or \$500/family to preselect and reserve specific HHD seats.

High Holiday Appeal - Both congregations have a means of special offerings during the HHD’s, each is a bit different.

Each year, the CBI President appoints a congregant who makes the High Holy Day Appeal on Erev Rosh Hashanah and requests each family to consider a special donation to the synagogue during the upcoming High Holy Day season.

At BSS, there are a number of ways in which HHD donations are solicited. The BSS President’s HHD remarks from the *bima* encourage congregants to make HHD donations. And congregants who have taken part in HHD service honors are encouraged to make a HHD donation in honor of their participation.

Both congregations provide addressed donation envelopes that are placed inside all the HHD *Machzorim*.

High Holiday Text - During an earlier meeting of the Ritual Task Force, the “*Mishkan Hanefesh*” high holiday text was identified as the preferred book for all adult high holiday services at Congregation New.

High Holiday Honors - Both congregations’ HHD Honors are very similar. This is an inclusive list of those honors for planning purposes: Greeters, English or Hebrew

readings, Opening & Closing the Ark, Carrying *Torah* scrolls for *Hakafot*, *Torah* Blessings, *Torah* Chanting, *Hagbah* (raising *Torah*), *G'lilah* (dressing *Torah*), *Haftarah* Blessings & *Haftarah* chanting, *Shofar* Blowing & Calling the *Shofar* blasts.

CBI also honors its prior Presidents with an invitation for the president and spouse to sit on the *Bimah* along with the Rabbi.

High Holiday Music - Both congregations have a goal of either a high holiday cantorial soloist or cantor. BSS has a Cantorial fund that is used to offset the cost of having a high holiday cantor (see seating practices above).

Both congregations utilize a cello and piano for *Kol Nidre*. Guitars or other instruments are also used at CBI.

Of note is the CBI musical interlude, which historically has been used to set the tone for the *Yizkor* service, with music by the Cassin's playing viola and cello, and a few piano offerings as well. (*Kol Nidre* is always played again as part of the interlude)

High Holiday Greeters - both congregations utilize greeters to welcome congregants and guests to the synagogue.

High Holiday Childcare - The Ritual Task Force unanimously agreed that offering High Holiday childcare services was an important way in which to facilitate full HHD participation by the caregivers of families with young children.

## **Rosh Hashanah - Specifics**

*Rosh Hashanah* is celebrated on *Tishrei* 1 and 2 at BSS. CBI has *Rosh Hashanah* services only on day 1 of *Tishrei*. In discussing this practice, it was felt that both days should be offered at Congregation New, so that those who find celebrating the second day of *Rosh Hashanah* as part of their spiritual practice would have it available for them.

All agreed that a morning youth service should be offered with the option of babysitting services being available so that caregivers of families with young children could remain at the synagogue for morning services.

Insofar as the length of service, both congregations service length are about the same and so close that it is felt that the Rabbi for Congregation New can work within the usual parameters for *Rosh Hashanah* services.

## **Yom Kippur Specifics**

The Ritual Task Force evaluated *Yom Kippur* by evaluating the individual prayerful experiences at each Synagogue. Discussion was had regarding the global *Yom Kippur* experience and with similarities noted, a review of the differences ensued. Short of timing, the offerings were very similar. There were several differences identified: the start time for evening *Yom Kippur* services, CBI's musical interlude for the afternoon, the amount of down time between morning

and afternoon services and the targeted time at which point the services would conclude on the day of *Yom Kippur*.

There was a discussion about the various start times of the *Erev Yom Kippur / Kol Nidre* services over the years for both congregations. It was agreed that a 7:30 pm start time would be the most appropriate for the *Erev Yom Kippur / Kol Nidre* service.

In discussing the musical interlude, all agreed that Congregation New should strive to have the musical interlude during the day of *Yom Kippur*, and specifically prior to *Yizkor*, in order to set the mood for that service.

In regard to mid-day offerings, a discussion was had as to what might be done during the mid-day downtime between morning services and the start of *Yom Kippur* afternoon offerings. The previously conducted lay led CBI midday meditational or other meaningful readings were described and discussed. The concept would be to have a lay led opportunity during which time the Rabbi could take a break and those that wished to stay could continue with *Yom Kippur* readings and meditations, until the afternoon offerings would start.

Finally a discussion was held in regards to the timing of when the *Yom Kippur* services would end. The actual time of sunset was reviewed for the upcoming 10 years, and it was noted that sunset occurred somewhere between 6:36 pm and 7:09 pm. After a thorough discussion, it was determined that the best targeted time to conclude would be 6:30 pm. It was noted that those who wanted to fast to the exact time of sunset would still be able to do so; and for those for whom the conclusion of the service would be the appropriate time for a break the fast experience, could also be accommodated.

Overall it was agreed that given some flexibility, the Rabbi of Congregation New could work together with a ritual committee to identify the best times that would meet the needs of Congregation New and meld the activities for a meaningful *Yom Kippur* experience.

## Other Jewish Holidays and Commemorative Events

In regard to the other Jewish Holidays, it was determined that making certain offerings (spiritual and historical events) was important and the following were considered:

- **Selichot** - Prep for high holy days held on the Saturday a week before before Rosh Hashanah
- **Kever Avot v'Imahot** - Visiting the graves of our loved ones
- **Rosh Hashanah** - The Jewish New Year
- **Yom Kippur** - The Day of Atonement
- **Sukkot** - The Feast of Tabernacles or in some translations the Festival of Shelters
- **Sh'mini Atzeret** - The eighth (day) of assembly. The day (or two days) after Sukkot.\*
- **Simchat Torah** - Jewish holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings, and the beginning of a new cycle\*

\*Historically, Sh'mini Atzeret & Simchat Torah were two separate holidays (a day of reflection after Sukkot & a celebration of Torah the following day). However, in Israel & in Reform congregations, which generally observe one day of holidays rather than two, Sh'mini Atzeret is observed concurrently w/ Simchat Torah.

- **Chanukah** - The festival of lights, celebrating the rededication of the temple
- **Tu B'Shevat** - A celebration of trees, a "new year or birthday" of trees

- **Purim** - Commemorates the defeat of Haman's plot to massacre the Jews as recorded in the book of Esther
- **Pesach - Passover** - Major Jewish spring festival which commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery
- **Yom HaShoah** - A day of remembrance of the Holocaust
- **Yom HaAtzmaut** - Israel Independence Day celebration
- **Lag B'Omer** - Seven-week period between Passover and *Shavuot*, a period of time known as the *Omer* - being the 33rd day of the Omer, traditionally in commemoration of the end of the plague that killed Rabbi Akiba's students or of the bravery of Bar Kokba, also the day that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, "the Rashbi", a Mishnaic sage and leading disciple of Rabbi Akiva in the 2nd century, and the day on which he revealed the deepest secrets of kabbalah in the form of the *Zohar*
- **Shavuot** - Commemorates the anniversary of the giving of the Torah by God to the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai
- **Tisha B'Av** - Day of mourning the destruction of both ancient Temples in Jerusalem. In modern times, many Jews understand *Tishah B'Av* as a day to remember many tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history, and to reflect on the suffering that still occurs in our world.

It was noted that only BSS celebrated the following festivals and events: *Sefirat Ha Omer* (Counting of the Omer) between 2nd Day *Pesach* & *Shavuot*, *Tisha B'Av* (a day of mourning the destruction of both ancient Temples in Jerusalem). *Yizkor* service during the Festival morning services at the end of *Sukkot* & *Pesach*, and also during the *Shavuot* Festival morning service.

After some very heartfelt discussion, and a look forward to all of the holiday offerings and other Jewish experiences, it was determined that the overall plan would be to initially offer all holiday and event experiences for all congregants to participate in, even if it was for only a few. The hope and expectation would be that with enthusiastic public relations and creative programming and as fellowship grows in Congregation New, that participation would also increase. However, if after a look back fails to demonstrate enthusiastic participation, then changes in service or event offerings could be modified.

## **B'NAI MITZVAH**

Both organizations have formal *b'nai mitzvah* programs which have been documented in writing and in practice. The group drifted into the realm of "finances of the b'nai mitzvah prerequisites and requirements," and after a discussion it was determined that this would be a topic best forwarded to and addressed by the finance taskforce.

Upon becoming a *b'nai mitzvah*, traditionally at age 12 or 13, our Jewish young people are ceremonially recognized by the community as being able to take on new religious privileges and responsibilities -- the foremost of which is being called up to the *Torah* to recite the *Torah aliyah* blessings before and after the reading of the week's *Torah* portion.

The Ritual Task Force acknowledges that a partnership, between the congregation and the families with children, is essential for our youngest congregants to be able to reach this Jewish life cycle milestone. It is recommended that Congregation New be committed to offering Jewish and Hebrew education to our school aged and adult members, as well as offering *Shabbat* and Jewish Holiday programming that meets the needs of families with young children in order that they can connect deeply with the rhythms, values and practices of Jewish life. It is also recognized that the caregivers of

these pre-*b'nai mitzvah* age congregants must show a mutual commitment to the goal of their child eventually being prepared for their *b'nai mitzvah* by prioritizing attendance at these *Shabbat*, Holiday and educational offerings. One possible way to formally demonstrate this mutual commitment between the congregation and the family to raising Jewishly-educated children is to present all of our Consecration students with a *yad*. This *yad* could be mounted on a frame for future removal and use during their subsequent training and then later on the *Shabbat* when they are called to the *Torah* as a *b'nai mitzvah*.

Reaching the goal of becoming a *b'nai mitzvah* at age 12 or 13, should be an enriching Jewish experience for both the student and the family. In order for this *b'nai mitzvah* goal to be reached in such a positive manner, the caregivers in families with young children must be made aware of the specific objectives that their child should meet each year of their religious and Hebrew education. The Ritual Task Force would encourage making several opportunities available to those on the path to *b'nai mitzvah* and their families by offering a *b'nai mitzvah* family education program once in 5th grade and twice in 6th grade.

The ceremonial coming of age during the *Shabbat b'nai mitzvah* celebration demonstrates that the *b'nai mitzvah* is prepared to take their place as an adult member of the congregation. Their willingness is demonstrated by their participation in three important components of Jewish life -- Jewish communal worship, the *Torah* service, and *Tikkun Olam*.

The titles of *bar mitzvah* and *bat mitzvah* are given to all Jews who reach the age of 12 or 13, regardless of whether or not they have studied to commemorate the occasion with a ritual, ceremony, or celebration. The Ritual Task Force hopes that Congregation New will build a community that will engage and inspire families such that all of them will want to mark this milestone in a formal way. That typically includes a demonstration of acceptance of the *bar* or *bat mitzvah's* place as an adult member of the community by participating as such in *Shabbat* worship.

Each of our students is *b'tzelim elohim*, created in God's image, and as such, each will possess different abilities and learning styles. It is important that Congregation New be committed to creating an individualized learning plan that will ensure each child's success. The Ritual Task Force hopes that Congregation New will focus upon creating a meaningful *b'nai mitzvah* experience that will best reflect each student's strengths and interests while helping them achieve success in each of the three areas of adult Jewish life -- **Jewish Communal Worship**, **Torah Service**, and **Tikkun Olam**.

Regarding **Jewish Communal Worship**, the *b'nai mitzvah* should strive to become familiar with the structure and meaning of the *Shabbat* evening and *Shabbat* morning worship. The *b'nai mitzvah* may lead some or all of the *Shabbat* services during their *b'nai mitzvah Shabbat*.

Being called to the **Torah** for an *aliyah* blessing for the very first time is the pinnacle of the communal celebration of a *b'nai mitzvah*. In addition to being given the honor of a

*Torah* blessing *aliyah*, the *b'nai mitzvah* may also learn to read or chant some of the week's *Torah* portion, *Haftarah* blessings and *Haftarah* portion during the *Shabbat Torah* service. At the end of the *Torah* service, the *b'nai mitzvah* has the opportunity to teach the congregation, by sharing their *D'var Torah* (literally, words of *Torah*). The *D'var Torah* is the *b'nai mitzvah's* chance to reflect on the teachings that they gleaned from the week's *Torah* or *Haftarah* portion, or what the *b'nai mitzvah* experience has taught them.

***Tikkun olam***, repairing the world, is central to Reform Judaism, and it encompasses all of our responsibilities as Jews to bring the world closer to God's vision of wholeness and perfection. Today, *Tikkun Olam* is identified with working for social justice, peace, freedom, equality and the restoration of the environment. It therefore follows that each *b'nai mitzvah* student be encouraged to explore how they translate their Jewish values into tangible actions and improvements in the lives of others through a *b'nai mitzvah tikkun olam* project.

*B'nai mitzvah* preparations should be a time for the entire family to have an enriching and joyful Jewish experience. The future congregation should, through family education and programming, demonstrate how families can carve out time together to create powerful and memorable Jewish experiences. Such examples of memorable Jewish time together might include: working on a *Tikkun Olam* project together, making *challah* as a family, or marking the beginning and ending of *Shabbat* with candle lighting & *Havdalah* observances.

## DIETARY RESTRICTIONS

The dietary guidelines of both synagogues were compared and found to be remarkably similar, with the exception of Beth Shalom's requirement for certified Kosher meat. To that end the following guidelines are recommended:

While it is recommended that private, off premises parties, held in conjunction with Jewish celebrations or life events, and hosted by private individual(s) follow these Dietary Guidelines, it is neither mandatory nor required.

The following dietary guidelines apply to all foods served during any Synagogue sponsored activity for Congregation New, whether on premises (inside or outside) or off premises.

- Pork (bacon, ham, pepperoni, etc.), shellfish (crabs, oysters, crawfish, etc.) and fish such as catfish and shark may not be served inside the Synagogue.
- Dairy products and meat (including chicken) may not be mixed at the same meal (ie: chicken parmesan, cheeseburgers, etc.).
- Preparation of any baked goods or other foods should use only vegetable oils, and be free of lard or animal fat.
- While we are interested in preserving Jewish traditions, and in being mindful of the practices of our current and future congregants, as well as the general



Jewish community, Kosher meats are preferred and encouraged. If a meat is not certified as Kosher, it should be clearly labeled as such.

- For on-premises events, congregants are asked to submit a complete food and beverage menu to the Rabbi for approval prior to finalizing their choices for any event they are sponsoring.

## **SYNAGOGUE SUPPORTED ACTIVITIES**

The next issue that was discussed was what Synagogue supported activities could occur on *Shabbat* and other holy days. The work prohibition on *Shabbat* extends to these *Shabbat*-like holy days, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, first day of *Sukkot*, *Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah*, first and seventh day of *Pesach*, and *Shavuot*.

Three categories of activities were identified by the Ritual Task Force as potentially having the merit to be supported by Congregation New on *Shabbat* and *Shabbat*-like holy days.

The three categories are:

- Jewish educational activities (such as a scholar/artist in residence, Jewish book club or Jewish cooking club)
- *Tikkun Olam* activities (such as preparing food for food pantry)
- Hiddur mitzvah (beautifying the *mitzvah*) activities (decorating for an on premises *b'nai mitzvah* party)

Activities should be evaluated upon their individual merits and their support of the three categories listed above.

It was unanimously agreed that worship services, *Torah* study and any accompanying festive meal should be prioritized on *Shabbat* and these *Shabbat*-like holy days, and that none of these three other supported activities should interfere with worship, *Torah* study or the festive meal.

## **In Conclusion**

During the collaborative effort to understand the established customs and rituals of our two congregations, the Ritual Task Force members developed mutual respect for and trust in each other. It was in this state of shared understanding that we were able to engage with each other in an open, honest, and sincere fashion while examining the many issues of ritual and custom.

The following two items were felt to require more in-depth consideration if and when Congregation New is established.

Additional discussions are needed regarding how to best utilize the Union Prayer Book during Congregation New's Friday evening *Shabbat* worship. Further discussions

between Congregation New's rabbi, those who embrace the Union Prayer Book liturgy, and other congregants will be necessary in order to determine the optimal approach to creating a fulfilling Shabbat experience for all.

While the Ritual Task Force endorsed Congregation New's observance of all the Jewish holidays and commemorations detailed in this summary; it is recommended, that after an appropriate period of time (2-4 years) after the new congregation is established, a review be undertaken to determine whether there is value, relevance and congregational support for the programming and activities that are initially established.

The Ritual Task Force members prioritized finding inclusive solutions to resolving differences identified during our systematic exploration of our Shabbat and holiday observances, b'nai mitzvah preparations, and kashrut standards. Ultimately our discussions did not identify any major barriers to building a stronger, more inclusive and unified Reform congregation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

We welcome inquiries requesting clarification that would permit a reader to better understand this report. To that end, we have included each Ritual Task Force member's contact information below.

## **JSEC RITUAL TASK FORCE MEMBERS**

### **Congregation B'nai Israel**

Harold D Brandt, MD (co-chair)  
hdbrandt@gmail.com

Robbie Rubin, JSEC Representative  
robbie.rubin@gmail.com

David Kirshner  
dkirsh@lsu.edu

Don Meltzer  
donaldmeltzer@hotmail.com

Lynn Weill  
lweill@cox.net

Celia Strickler  
celiacrose@aol.com

### **Beth Shalom Synagogue**

Rachel Hausmann, MD (co-chair)  
rachelhausmann@gmail.com

Lillia Berkowitz  
laralillia@gmail.com

Joel Goldman  
JoelGoldman1942@gmail.com

Lynn Kober  
destla@aol.com

Laurie Maas  
lauriebmaas@gmail.com

Heidi Shapiro  
hsshapiro@juno.com