

Ritual Survey Results

Presented by Aaron Danzig, Ritual Committee Chair

This past spring, many of you responded to a fairly comprehensive Survey on Ritual and Religious Practices at Sha'ar Zahav. We were thrilled that 34% of our membership responded to the email, and based on the composition of the respondents, the response is a good representation of our membership base. Overall, the results seemed to indicate that the membership is largely satisfied with the way we pray and with the variety of ritual programming we offer. While certain celebrations draw much more interest than others, the responses did point to certain opportunities to reinvigorate select rituals or even introduce other new formats of religious and ritual observance.

Accompanying this narrative, you can also download and review a (.pdf-formatted) copy of the visual presentation that I offered to the congregation on June 25th. I want to thank the 30 or so congregants who attended and participated in that discussion – they helped keep me honest in the interpretation of the data, and who offered wonderful insights and suggestions. I encourage you to download the presentation and follow along as you read this article, since the graphic depiction of the data helps illustrate the 'take-aways' that I'll provide here.

Research Objectives

We fielded the survey to answer a number of questions, namely:

- What motivates our congregation around Shabbat and other non-High Holiday Rituals?
- How should we prioritize our efforts around supporting and further developing ritual practice, observances, and celebrations throughout the year?
- What are people's attitudes around collaboration with other congregations?
- What are people's perceptions around service leading, in terms of lay-clergy mix?
- What are people's attitudes around specific rituals (e.g., Mourner's Kaddish)?

Around what observances do we congregate?

What was clear from the data (if it wasn't clear from being in shul), is that we're definitely a Friday night crowd (see presentation slide 5). Motivation to attend Friday night services measured nearly twice as strong as Saturday morning (see slide 10). It is core to the Sha'ar Zahav experience. What did come up in the presentation and discussion is that this year we may be able to reinvigorate the Saturday ritual experience with the introduction of new morning service formats (e.g., chavurah-style minyan, and Shabbat Simcha).

Learning from Torah is very important to our members: 46 percent strongly agreed (and 82 percent agreed) that they enjoy services which incorporates elements of Torah

(slide 11). In fact, the study of and/or ritual around Torah came up as a motivator for attending Saturday Shabbat services: While nearly 40% agreed that a Torah service on Saturday would motivate them to attend more often on Saturday, more discussion could help clarify whether congregants are looking for a formal Torah service or simply a teaching or discussion about the weekly *parsha*. (Re)Introducing a Torah service on Friday night would not motivate people to attend more often to the extent it would on Saturday, most likely because so much more people are already attending Friday nights.

Other holidays and celebrations that are high on people's lists include Simchat Torah, Chanukah, Purim, Chanukah, Sukkot, and Pride rituals (slide 10).

Recovery Shabbat and Daily Ma'ariv registered the lowest amount of interest among respondents, indicating that we should find new ways to make these observances relevant to our congregants if possible.

Ritual observance and participation

On the language of prayer: Congregants were asked to indicate their ideal mix of service liturgy language (slide 13). Most people appreciate Hebrew as the dominant (though not exclusive) language of prayer. 58 percent indicated they enjoy Shabbat services conducted (primarily) in Hebrew with some English readings. 49 percent would enjoy equal amounts of Hebrew and English; while 61 percent strongly disagreed they would enjoy a service without a measurable degree of Hebrew.

On rituals of remembrance: To address previous discussions and debates around our Mourners' Kaddish ritual (slide 14), we asked people to indicate their ideal preference (i.e., who stands, who recites). Our current *minhag* (custom) – specifically, where everyone stands and recites the kaddish – seems to satisfy a strong plurality of congregants. 59 percent prefer that everyone at least stand together, regardless of who recites or responds.

The responses do indicate that there is room for more education about mourning rituals. 20 percent did not have a preference for how the mourner's *kaddish* is observed among mourners versus congregants. Furthermore, 40 percent indicate they either don't know or have no preference as to whether they observe a *Yahrzeit* on the Friday succeeding the actual date, or the actual date itself (slide 15). During our discussion, the idea came up that if more people came to value observing the *Yahrzeits* of their loved ones on the actual date itself, it could become the basis for motivating congregants to attend our daily *Ma'ariv* service.

While most disagreed that changing up the weekly service format would be motivational in driving them to services, many congregants are open to new or alternative service formats, especially *niggun* or *chavurah* formats (slide 17).

Community Collaboration

We asked congregants about their experience around, and appreciation of the collaborative programming Sha'ar Zahav has enjoyed with neighboring (religious) communities. Sha'ar Zahav has a long-standing tradition of joining with communities like Temple Emanuel, MCC, Mission Minyan, City of Refuge and others. Of the 40

percent of respondents who have participated in collaborative services and celebrations, the overwhelming majority – 89 percent – agreed that these collaborations are valuable for our community (slide 19). 73 percent felt these experiences were personally valuable. Of the 60 percent who have not yet experienced collaborative services, most of these respondents – 72 percent – agreed we should pursue occasional collaborative services with neighboring Jewish communities. Both groups prioritized collaborative efforts with Jewish communities over non-Jewish communities, however there is support for collaboration with both Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

Leading Services

Congregation Sha'ar Zahav has a long history of clergy-lay leadership partnership, and indeed congregants are passionate about this aspect of our *kehilla*: 86 percent agreed – 51 percent strongly so – they enjoy services led by a combination of clergy and lay leaders (slide 22). This compares to only 53 percent who enjoy services led exclusively by clergy, and 32 percent who enjoy when exclusively lay leaders lead services. To this latter point, congregants identified (inconsistent) service leading quality among the laity as an area for improvement, and a potential opportunity for driving higher attendance at Friday night services in particular (slide 23).

Congregational Insights

Our members clearly identify our congregation as one that is musically inclined and engaged. 87 percent – 62 percent strongly so – indicated they enjoy services where they can sing a lot (slide 25). Musical accompaniment is also ritually enhancing for many – although not all – service goers. It serves as a strong motivator for attending *Kabbalat Shabbat*: 50 percent agreed – 22 percent strongly so – that they would be more likely to attend a Friday night service with musical accompaniment (slide 26).

Congregants are also motivated by ritual opportunity for meditation and contemplation (slide 27). 68 percent agreed – 31 percent strongly so – that opportunities for silent meditation were part of their ideal Shabbat service experience. Furthermore, when asked about alternative service formats, 48 percent indicated interest in a meditative format.

As far as service structure and format, most of us are comfortable with a consistent liturgical structure or order, however within that structure, the plurality of congregants also enjoy exploring a varied selection of prayers and liturgy from week to week (slide 28). This is validating of how we carry out Shabbat services today.

In evaluating congregants preference around incorporating traditional liturgical elements in the service, we should recognize a fair amount of traditionalists in our constituency, which is indicative of our heritage as a *kehilla*: nearly one-fourth of respondents strongly preferred a more traditional service liturgy (slide 29). In context of evaluating the spectrum of traditional to 're-interpretive' liturgy, our congregants clustered around the format we offer today, namely a service structured around traditional liturgy but embellishing that liturgy in new ways.

In terms of interest in an unstructured service, or one that focuses on another non-liturgical element of Jewish spirituality, 26 percent preferred this, however 54 percent were resistant to such formats. The implication here is that introducing an 'out-of-the-box' format would likely be alienating for many congregants when it comes to the core service experience. If we do introduce alternative service formats (e.g., meditation, niggun, etc.), they would better be scheduled in parallel with the established format, and not as a mutually exclusive choice.

Many congregants may resonate with a specific service format (e.g., with a teaching, or musical accompaniment), and indicated they would be more likely to attend if they knew (in advance) when that format would be happening (slide 30). The opportunity here is to clearly identify and market when specific service formats are scheduled to occur. It's also a challenge to service leaders to engage in more thematic service composition (e.g., in terms of readings) or formats (e.g., musical), and to make sure these services are worked out in advance and publicized.

When asked about their participation level around Hebrew and English prayers (slide 31), fully two-thirds of respondents claim to sing or read along with almost all prayers, Hebrew and English. 27 percent read only some prayers in Hebrew and English. Only one percent stated they were uncomfortable singing or reading aloud. The implication is that our congregation has matured in its command of the liturgy – Hebrew and English. One could argue that service leaders may not need to narrate or introduce individual prayers during the service to the extent that it may come across as pedantic.

We also have an opportunity to engage congregants even more throughout the service (slide 31). Over half of respondents indicated they enjoy the chance to be part of the service in some capacity. Furthermore, a strong constituency – 42 percent – indicated interest in a service where there is active discussion around the Torah portion or drash. So we may want to focus some effort on how to make the service experience even more interactive and educational when it comes to Torah (or Talmud for that matter).

Not surprisingly, our members are motivated by the social connection they find at Sha'ar Zahav (slide 32). 68 percent would be more motivated to attend Friday night if they knew their friends would be at shul that night. Furthermore, 52 percent are interested in a Chavurah-style in-home service format.

Summary:

There are a number of opportunities and next steps that surfaced from this study (and ensuing Q&A):

- An opportunity to reinvigorate the Shabbat morning (shacharit) experience and make it more relevant to more congregants. Shabbat Simcha and a pilot Chavurah program are some ways we are addressing this issue in 2009.
- We can afford to identify greater opportunity to connect people to Torah, whether that is through discussions or teachings on the weekly parsha and/or through a Torah service on Saturday mornings.

- While there is limited interest in daily Ma'ariv, that service does present an opportunity to give people more of a connection, especially as a resource for observing their family's Yahrzeits on the actual Hebrew date.
- While we should explore offering specific alternative service formats (such as Chavurah, niggun, or meditative), these should not necessarily be offered at the expense of the core service format and experience.
- By and large, our congregation values collaborating with other neighborhood communities, especially Jewish congregations.
- As far as service leadership, the clergy-lay leader pairing 'hits the sweet spot' for our members.
- Our congregants are rooted in traditional elements of the service, and desires a consistent service structure. Any efforts to offer alternative formats must be mindful to not occur at the expense of the core service experience.
- There is an opportunity to more explicitly market or communicate a specific service format (e.g., musical, discussion-based) in advance of the service date, to help congregants better plan their attendance.
- Congregants by and large are comfortable and familiar with our liturgy – both Hebrew and English – so service leaders should feel comfortable 'taking off the training wheels' to facilitate a better service flow.
- People are looking for opportunities to participate and engage in discussion. A teaching format of service can help engage members to the extent they will further enjoy services.

Winners of our drawing:

Finally, a big *mazal tov* to the winners of our drawing:

Michael Gitt has won two (2) tickets to Cantor Unplugged III

Ami Zusman has won two (2) season passes to Music in the Mishkan.

Finally, a big *todah rabbah* to all who took the time to share their views by taking this important survey!

P.S. If you are interested in helping to shape the future of ritual practices and celebrations at Sha'ar Zahav, I encourage you to attend our monthly Ritual Committee meetings, scheduled for the last Thursday of each month in our Oneg Room, starting at 6:30 pm.

B'shalom,

Aaron Danzig