

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE ADOPTION OF
RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS SERVICES TASK FORCE
AS APPROVED BY THE RELIGIOUS SERVICES COMMITTEE

September 5, 2006

I. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

A. FRIDAY EVENING

Continue Bayitt

B. SATURDAY MORNING

1. SHABBAT AND FAMILY SERVICES GENERALLY

a. "Resident Scholar should speak occasionally": Current contract calls for two Shabbat services per year. President/Rabbi to follow up with Adult Education Committee.

b. "Give junior congregation an early Aliyah as a group and add age-appropriate roles for them, especially 11-13 year olds, after the Torah service, e.g., singing Eyn Keyloheynu/Adon Olam or reading a prayer in English.": Rabbi to continue to do this.

c. "Involve families by offering them an Aliyah": Rabbi to continue to do this.

d. "Provide a written/companion guide to the service": Miriam Avins is in the process of writing such a guide to be available for use in the sanctuary and chapel.

e. "Announce page numbers frequently and explain prayers/components of the service during it": Rabbi and Cantor and lay leaders to continue to do this.

f. "Continue Tot Shabbat": Tot Shabbat is to continue as is. Josh Bender to evaluate it after discussion with families involved to determine whether it should be changed in any significant way.

g. "Distribute an annual calendar with Shabbat offerings/information and update it quarterly": Refer to Henry Feller, for assignment to support staff, as appropriate, to create an annual calendar, for posting on the congregation's website, to which congregants would be directed by references in the weekly handout and monthly bulletin.

h. "Distribute a CD containing melodies presently used in prayers, blessings and hymns during the service": Presently a CD is distributed to new members and school age children. Further distribution of the CD through sale at the Shukan should be promoted through the bulletin. Eliza Feller to continue to work on a second companion CD of Friday night prayers and zemirot.

2. BAR MITZVAH SERVICES

a. “Eliminate presentation by congregation’s officers”: Move to the end of the service when announcements are made. Shorten the presentation; keep personal comments to a minimum; no speech to be given.

b. “Limit the number and length of special speeches”: Offer parents either a Tallit presentation, or, later, after the Haftorah, allow them to give remarks or a D’var Torah (the latter reviewed in advance by the Rabbi). Limit parents to 2 of 3 possible speaking opportunities, and to 4 minutes total. Parents will be updated and Handbook updated.

c. Assign alternate readings in lieu of speeches for family members.

C. SATURDAY AFTERNOON

No recommendations

D. SHABBAT EXPERIENCES OTHER THAN ABOVE

No recommendations

E. OTHER IDEAS NOT LINKED TO A PARTICULAR SHABBAT SERVICE

a. “Develop more fully the concept of a bar mitzvah class/year and what the expectations are for the child and family”: The Rabbi to continue his present efforts in this regard.

b. “Hold a class on the content and choreography of services; home rituals; procedures for blessings/aliyot/honors”: Nancy Seibert and the Adult Education Committee to continue their efforts in this regard.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS REQUIRING FURTHER WORK, WITH A RECOMMENDATION AS TO WHICH INDIVIDUAL(S) OR COMMITTEES SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THE FURTHER EFFORT

A. FRIDAY EVENING

a. “Seder Shel Shabbat”: Refer to the Rabbi and Josh Bender for further study.

b. “Adding services occasionally, with an educational component, e.g., speaker, Torah study”: Refer to the Adult Education Committee and to Eliza Feller (Bayitt) for further study.

B. SATURDAY MORNING

1. SHABBAT AND FAMILY SERVICES GENERALLY

a. “Consider revising the Resident Scholar’s schedule and contractual arrangement to allow him to speak at more than two Shabbat services per year”: Refer to the Executive Committee.

b. “Guest speakers should be invited from time to time”: Refer to the Adult Education Committee with Rabbi.

c. “Give an Aliyah/speaking opportunity regularly to post bar mitzvah students, e.g., mitzvah corps, and to college/graduate students”: Refer to the Rabbi and to Josh Bender as to the mitzvah corps. Refer to the Religious Services Committee for outreach to college/graduate students.

d. “Shorten Shaharit (morning service), which all would attend, then split into worship groups that would meet concurrently in different parts of the sanctuary/building, for a learner’s minyan, or a Torah service and sermon, or a children’s story hour/tot Shabbat, followed by an inclusive, singing of Musaf in which the entire congregation would participate”: Refer to the Rabbi with input from many segments of the congregation.

e. “Change junior congregation to engage participants more and to connect the service more closely to the family service held concurrently by, e.g., 1) sending a weekly email to congregants containing both themes of the weekly Torah portion geared for junior congregation and a separate commentary on the portion for older students and their parents, and, 2) changing the junior congregation service from a “mini” adult service to a more theme-oriented experience centered on an age-appropriate discussion/re-enactment of the Torah portion”: Refer to Josh Bender.

2. BAR MITZVAH SERVICES

“Reduce the maximum number of Aliyot for the family from 5 to 4; increase the number for the congregation from 2 to 3”: Referred to, and approved by, the Religious Services Committee at its 8/1/06 meeting for immediate implementation. Rabbi and

Henry will implement through updating parents and Handbook.

C. SATURDAY AFTERNOON

a. “Continue Kiddush lunches after chapel and family services and ensure that the quality of food is consistently good”: Refer to the Executive Committee, as cost is a factor. Consider congregational sponsors to reduce costs.

b. “Add a study session opportunity, not necessarily Torah study, geared toward general Jewish learning”: Refer to the Adult Education Committee.

D. SHABBAT EXPERIENCES OTHER THAN ABOVE

“Offer more social and outdoor activities to increase members’ sense of community”: Refer to Eliza Feller and Membership Committee.

E. OTHER IDEAS NOT LINKED TO A PARTICULAR SHABBAT SERVICE

a. “Music, choir and melodies”: Refer to the Cantor to implement explanation/teaching about the music used, especially at Friday evening and chapel services.

b. “Sound system”: Refer to Henry Feller.

c. “Assign a mentor (individual or family) to new members who would encourage them to attend and participate in services”: Refer to the Membership Committee.

d. “Integrate into the religious school educational opportunities for parents tied to their children’s learning”: Refer to Josh Bender to develop along the model of the grade three companion program presently offered to those parents once a month on Sundays.

III. IDEAS THAT SHOULD BE DEFERRED AT PRESENT

A. FRIDAY EVENING

No recommendations

B. SATURDAY MORNING

1. SHABBAT AND FAMILY SERVICES GENERALLY

- a. "Increase congregational participation, e.g., leading parts of the chapel service; giving a D'var Torah."
- b. "Encourage the Resident Scholar to devote a Shabbat presentation to a topic of special interest to teenagers."
- c. "Reconsider whether ending the service at noon is important."

2. BAR MITZVAH SERVICES

No recommendations

C. SATURDAY AFTERNOON

No recommendations

D. SHABBAT EXPERIENCES OTHER THAN ABOVE

No recommendations

E. OTHER IDEAS NOT LINKED TO A PARTICULAR SHABBAT SERVICE

- a. "Consider architectural changes to the sanctuary and use of existing space."
- b. "Institute a regular minyan."
- c. "Offer adults an opportunity for spiritual preparation for the High Holidays."

End document #1

Begin document #2

BETH AM RELIGIOUS SERVICES TASK FORCE

May 31, 2006

Jim Jacobs, chair, and members of the
Beth Am Board of Trustees
2501 Eutaw Place
Baltimore, Maryland 21217

Dear Jim and members of the Board of Trustees:

It is my pleasure to present the attached status report from the Beth Am Religious Services Task Force.

Consistent with the second of the two principal charges to the RSTF (i.e., developing ideas for “increasing attendance of current members and attracting prospective members”), the Task Force recommends providing a copy of *Youth*, Matisyahu’s new CD, as a door prize to everyone who attends services. ¹ Alright, handing out Matisyahu’s music is not really the Task Force’s recommendation for increasing attendance. Actually, there is no single recommendation nor even set of recommendations that will increase attendance. But rather this report describes a process and a compilation of ideas that provide a vision for the future of Beth Am.

If there is a single theme that can be gleaned from the year long work of this Task Force it is that the state of religious worship at Beth Am is good!

I was asked to step in and finish the good work of the original RSTF chair, Rabbi Joe Menashe. Joe did the heavy lifting with this group. I have simply attempted to bring some of the ideas together and serve as a mere scrivener for this report.

In addition to Joe Menashe there are many people to thank, including the more than 150 congregants who participated in the work of the Task Force. In particular, we owe thanks to Elaine Freeman, the Vice Chair of the Task Force, and the subcommittee co-chairs, Nancy Shuger, Miriam Avins, Steve Himmelrich, Joanne Gold and Eliza Feller. And thank you to Ann Starer, who stepped in and chaired the sessions with parents of young and school age children.

Sincerely,

Stuart D. Kaplow

SDK:tbm
Attachment

¹ If you live under a rock, Matisyahu, whose real name is Matthew Miller, is a hot Lubavitch hip-hop-tinged reggae singer, with an album that has in recent weeks been at the number 1 spot on the iTunes Music Store’s sale chart.

SOME KEY OBSERVATIONS

This status report does not call for drastic change, but rather reflects the diversity of our congregation and makes a series of recommendations for how Beth Am can serve its congregational family as we embark on our second 30 years.

It is significant that more than 150 congregants participated in the work of the RSTF in making these recommendations to the Executive Committee for consideration by the larger Board of Trustees. The bullet points below some key observations gleaned from the compilation of recommendations that follow (that said, these are not intended as an executive summary nor any specific conclusion from this work effort). The reader is urged to read the complete listing of recommendations:

- A variety of Friday evening religious services and programming should be pursued, some including dinner and other activities (and, as appropriate, offering child care).
- Opportunities should be expanded for study and spiritual learning on Shabbat (beyond the current 8:45 a.m. Torah study), using lay leaders and guests, without reliance solely on Beth Am clergy.
- Congregants desire more and additional social activities that do not necessarily have Jewish content (from day trips to hikes to ...)

- Increase congregational participation in services when there is a b'nai mitzvah
- Engage greater inclusion of children and families in the Shabbat service, both to lead some portions and to participate in others
- Address desire of some for making sanctuary services more intimate

- Continue to evolve changes toward a more participatory Junior Congregation
- Feature Resident Scholar and other guest speakers at Shabbat services
- Work to have parents and children together at Family Shabbat
- Hold concurrent breakout worship and study options during Torah service (as above, without exclusive reliance on clergy)

The detailed recommendations described in the status report, almost to the one, reflect the debate over whether there should be more tradition or greater change. However, all seem to agree that *an infusion of passion and commitment is the top priority*, and that such will likely be achieved through incremental efforts to implement appropriate recommendations that satisfy Beth Am's diverse congregation.

INTRODUCTION

This is a May 31, 2006, status report of the Beth Am Religious Services Task Force.

This writing is intended to report on the work of the RSTF commencing in July 2005 through the date of this report. This is characterized as a 'status report' because the crux of the recommendations of the RSTF is that much of this work continue and be an ongoing effort carried on within the existing committee structure at Beth Am.

With respect to procedure, this status report responds to a charge (see below) from the Beth Am Board of Trustees and, as such, this report is directed from the RSTF to the Board with the anticipation that the Board will review and consider each of the recommendations and, in conjunction with the professional staff, determine how best to proceed.

It is important to note that the initial and significant query posed to the RSTF arose from the fact that a sharp increase of b'nai mitzvot celebrations on the upcoming Beth Am calendar (more than a dozen annually) was on a collision course with our vibrant and popular chapel services. At its second meeting, the RSTF unanimously agreed not to add an additional concurrent adult chapel service while a bar/bat mitzvah was taking place in the main sanctuary.

Which leads to a comment about process ... Despite the unanimous agreement by all RSTF members in attendance rejecting a concurrent service (as described above), the Task Force determined early on that it was not seeking unanimity or even a majority vote on recommendations. Recognizing the diversity among Beth Am members, we determined to use as model, the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, where historically 6 votes have been needed from among the committee's 25 voting members to give legitimacy to a minority opinion.

Utilizing that process, over the ten months, the Task Force gathered ideas on some potentially far-reaching recommendations that could change how and when religious services are conducted at Beth Am. To facilitate a discussion of those ideas, the Task Force was divided into three subcommittees: (1) increasing attendance at the monthly Family Service; (2) examining ways to better integrate diverse groups of Beth Am members at Shabbat Services; and (3) and exploring Friday night and other non-Saturday morning Shabbat opportunities.

This status report does not call for drastic change, but rather reflects the diversity of our congregation and makes a series of recommendations for how Beth Am can serve its congregational family as we embark on our second 30 years.

THE CHARGE TO THE RELIGIOUS SERVICES TASK FORCE

In June, 2005, the Board of Trustees charged the Religious Services Task Force with the ‘goal’ of developing a plan that:

- A. Maintains the variety of religious services offered by Beth Am in the face of an upcoming surge in the number of b’nai mitzvah services;
- B. Encourages increased attendance at services by responding to the varied needs of the constituent groups within the Beth Am community;
- C. And, looks for opportunities to attract new members through religious service offerings

By way of background, it was recognized that the jump in the number of b’nai mitzvot starting in late 2005 and continuing for at least the next two to three years would cause a sharp decrease in chapel services. (For example, following the High Holydays 2005, there were six consecutive weeks of either family or b’nai mitzvah services in October-November 2005; starting in mid-March 2006, there are eleven scheduled b’nai mitzvot, which, with monthly family services, leaves the possibility of only one chapel service during the 14 weeks through mid-June.) While there is certainly overlap among attendees of family, chapel, and b’nai mitzvah services, some congregants feel more comfortable at one type of service than another.

While the scheduling imbalance among the three types of services prompted the convening of the Task Force, it also presents an opportunity to consider how we can encourage attendance at religious services and potentially grow membership.

Today, Beth Am offers several types of religious services in two venues. These include, for all ages:

- (1) Family services in the sanctuary (monthly, excluding summer)
- (2) Chapel services (averaging 2-3 times a month, plus all summer)
- (3) B’nai mitzvah services in the sanctuary (as warranted)

And for children:

- (4) Junior Congregation (during family services)
 - (5) Tot Shabbat (during family services)
 - (6) Havdalah and holiday services for school-age children (several times a year);
- and

In addition, flowing from the Strategic Plan and at the initiative of staff and congregants, we have, within the last year, added (7) Friday evening services for people in their 20s-30s and (8) three Seder Shel Shabbat for families with elementary-school-age children, as well as (9) programs for pre-kindergarten children and parents through the Shoreshim group.

Other programs, though not directly associated with religious services, have addressed spiritual issues, such as the 2003 Pearlstone weekend with Rabbi Tirzah Firestone and some of the programs of the Rosh Chodesh group. Addressing another aspect of religious services, Rabbi Konheim initiated a text study group that meets weekly before Shabbat services, and last year taught classes for adults in introduction to services and Hebrew. A grassroots effort has responded to the desire for Shabbat zmirot with a more-or-less weekly session at Kiddush lunch.

This Task Force was assembled with a membership representative of the many constituencies at Beth Am. Its success is grounded in the ability to respond to the variety of congregational needs regarding different services. An effort was made to include chapel service “regulars”, family service attendees, and parents of school age children.

The Board of Trustees established a series of expectations for the RSTF:

- (i) The Task Force should be open to exploring issues not immediately associated with current religious services (e.g., the role of education in services, how music is incorporated, or other issues that the group identifies)
- (ii) It should also consider the needs and interests of various constituencies. These might include new members, non-members (e.g., unaffiliated Jews in the city and elsewhere), long-time members who do not regularly attend services, religious school and day-school children, pre-K children and their parents, congregants not well-versed in traditional ritual and/or with low or no Hebrew proficiency.
- (iii) At the same time, the Task Force should keep in mind Beth Am’s religious traditions, what congregants enjoy about services as they are currently presented, and our membership in the Conservative Movement.
- (iv) Given the general satisfaction among congregants with chapel services and b’nai mitzvah services—or at least, the variety that they offer—the Task Force should not feel compelled to make major changes in those areas. However, it has broad latitude to make recommendations for changes in the family service if it sees fit, and look for opportunities to develop other services (e.g., Friday evening, Havdalah, and perhaps others).
- (v) The Task Force is strongly encouraged to seek input from other congregants, and to organize itself into subgroups as appropriate.

And with the assistance of the Beth Am professional staff, the work was commenced.

THE SCHEDULE OF WORK

The Task Force was formed in June 2005 and met for the first time in July. In July and August the RSTF members identified issues and made the threshold determination to recommend to the Board of Trustees that there not be a parallel adult religious service in the chapel when b'nai mitzvot were held.

An open forum was held with congregants in December to further identify issues and additional input was solicited from the congregation at large. Congregants were asked to submit ideas via email and letter (and did). The Task Force came together again, both in the subcommittees and as a group of the whole in January, 2006. The subcommittee heads, supported by the professional staff, suggested strategies for involving more congregants and for looking beyond Beth Am. Two visioning sessions were held to further solicit input from those who had not been heard from before.

It is significant that more than 150 congregants participated in this work effort. While many attended meetings of the RSTF or the visioning sessions, opinions of select congregants (representing particular constituencies) were sought, while others communicated with the Task Force by email and letter.

Subcommittee chairs worked to compile the more than 180 ideas into recommendations.

As this status report is being prepared in concert with the subcommittee chairs, it is anticipated that this draft work product will be circulated to the larger RSTF, whose members will have an opportunity to review and comment, including determining if there is consensus beyond that characterized here for prioritizing specific recommendations to the Executive Committee for reporting to the entire Board of Trustees.

CONCLUSIONS REACHED

Education, Jewish literacy, and the transmission of that knowledge are pillars of what we do at Beth Am, including how we pray. Enhancing our literacy is a key to our survival as a congregation. Providing our children with access to their spiritual heritage is our communal responsibility.

As the work of the RSTF progressed it became evident that (despite the Task Force having been organized in three subcommittees) there were four categories (or groupings) of issues: Family Shabbat, Integrating Beth Am Families, Non-Saturday Morning Opportunities, and Spiritually Oriented Experiences. (That is, significantly, a category was added at the March visioning session highlighting the role of families with young children.)

As discussions were held, the following observations and insights became clear:

Diversity. Beth Am continues to be a diverse congregation with diverse perspectives in relation to the way we worship. This was seen by the Task Force both as strength in our community while presenting challenges for the future. Many of the conversations held at focus groups and visioning sessions raised questions and issues that were inconsistent and in some cases were in conflict with one another. This reinforced the importance of ongoing dialogue between congregants, clergy, and staff, and for all to remain open-minded and focused on what is best for Beth Am.

Reflection as an ongoing process. The need to assess religious services and worship experiences at Beth Am that provide congregants with forums for feedback, and the importance of being innovative while sensitive to our tradition, are ongoing processes and do not have starting and finishing points. Beth Am in all its diversity has evolved and continues to evolve, thus necessitating constant reflective practices.

The committee process makes Beth Am work. We are fortunate to have active committees at Beth Am that can respond to questions relevant to the work they do. Now that the Task Force has done its job of framing the important dialogue in a variety of forums, we will look to the existing Beth Am committees (Religious Services, Adult Education, Youth Education, etc.), each reporting to the Board of Trustees, to continue addressing the ever-changing and evolving needs of our constituencies and to continue assessing our programs. The reflective process that was the Religious Services Task Force should be intrinsic to all the work we do and should be integrated into everything we do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations, almost to the one, reflect the debate over whether there should be more tradition or greater change. However, all seem to agree that *an infusion of passion and commitment is the top priority*, however it is achieved.

Additionally, these recommendations should be viewed in light of the fact that almost all agree that there does not need to be a wholesale restructuring of religious services at Beth Am in order to satisfy multiple constituencies. *The state of religious services at Beth Am is good.*

Importantly, as these recommendations are reviewed, recall that we chose to use as a decision making model the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, where historically 6 votes have been needed from among the committee's 25 voting members to give legitimacy to a minority opinion. No effort was made to obtain a majority vote on any idea.

RECOMMENDATION. The kind of passion evoked at the December 2005 Family Shabbat where Ori Soltes, the Beth Am resident scholar, spoke cries out as a desire of a large number of Beth Am congregants. That event, a religious service on Shabbat, was broadly praised by those participating in the RSTF process. It received the largest number of positive responses to the type of religious service that individuals would attend in the future. Many congregants expressed a desire to have Ori Soltes participate in more services (both Family Services and in the chapel). Strong consideration should be given to altering the apparent relationship with Ori Soltes (that has him giving a series of evening adult education lectures, but not regularly speaking at Shabbat services), such that he would in the future lecture more regularly at Shabbat services.

RECOMMENDATION. Typical of many of the issues identified is a consideration of the main sanctuary as a place of prayer. One school of thought arises from a desire "to reduce the sense (and reality) of distance upstairs compared to downstairs." That group of congregants would advocate both: (i) Over the long term, pursue architectural changes that respect the design of the sanctuary and increase a sense of continuity or connection between bimah and congregation (including, possibly, removing the center lectern and replacing it with central steps and lectern both for a rabbi and cantor); and (ii) In the short term, rope off more seats and experiment with other ways to increase a sense of continuity or connection between bimah and congregation; including having the clergy stand below the bimah with the choir seated to the rear of the congregation.

However, the other school of thought is that (i) the majesty of the sanctuary is central to Beth Am and that the architectural glory, inspired by the Great Synagogue of Florence with its arched Byzantine-Moorish style, should not be altered in any manner (and in particular, not changed to adapt to the whim of the day). (ii) Moreover, roping off seats, at all, and the recent effort to rope off seats to force people to abandon their longtime seats for some forced act of community resulting from everybody sitting in the first five rows, is offensive, bullying, and in no way appropriate when it forces the will of a very small number on all of those who would sit elsewhere. This group by and large believes the Rabbi should stay on the bimah and stand at the

center lectern.

There is no resolving the disparate views of this issue, except to say that, in terms of raw numbers, more people who expressed their view on the topic like the sanctuary the way it is and oppose any architectural change. And people apparently don't like to be told where they have to sit. That said, issues of intimacy and of accessibility (in the sanctuary) are a very real consideration for some.

RECOMMENDATION. The Kiddush lunch is cherished by large numbers of congregants, for many reasons. The only negative comments (an interesting back-handed compliment) were about the inconsistent food at the Family Service lunches. More than a few congregants inquired about whether the food provided on a weekly basis could be made available at Family Service Kiddush lunches. That is (recognizing the self-catering of family services, of days of old, is problematic today), can Harriet Miller provide the food for all Kiddush lunches? ... if this a significant cost item that can not be overcome, possibly an addition p.r. push soliciting sponsors for Kiddush lunches is appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION. Guest speakers who can add an educational and Jewish literacy component into the Shabbat service should be pursued. Speakers could be as varied as from (1) the people who sit with the dead before the funeral, to (2) the Kashrut Board, (3) the publisher of the Jewish Times, (4) or the Cantor (on variations in synagogue music, and on other topics?).

RECOMMENDATION. A simple and easily resolved item appears to have surprisingly broad support – announce the page number much more frequently (both in the prayer book and Humash)! A related request is that an explanation of individual prayers and components of the service be integrated into the service (and yes, there was some recognition that this was an alternative to separate educational programs the subject of which was prayers). Whether or not there is a companion guide to our current siddur (that could be available each week) should be pursued. If there is not such a published guide, possibly we should create one? The theme that runs through this recommendation is that many (most?) congregants simply do not have a level of knowledge (or proficiency in Hebrew) to follow along with and appreciate the service.

RECOMMENDATION. Interestingly, there were a surprising number of related comments (including, but not limited to, two congregants who identified themselves as High Holiday only attendees, and one congregant who indicated he and his wife were leaving Beth Am) requesting a better and improved sound system in the sanctuary. While some questioned whether the work of this RSTF includes matters of the sound system, these folks were uniformly antagonistic over the fact they could not hear the service! (In fact, the family that is leaving says they are leaving because they can not hear the High Holiday service.) There was a general consensus that before money is spent on other physical plant projects, a modern sound system should be installed (and most certainly in advance of the High Holidays 2006).

Staff reports that the sound system techs have determined that our sound system is optimal for the space we have. They suggest, while sound at the back of the sanctuary could probably be

enhanced, the major problem is most likely that of the “cocktail hour” effect – people start talking, and others around them start talking louder in order to be heard. Essentially, we might be better advised to change the expectations of the behavior of those in services (i.e., if you want to hold a conversation, leave the sanctuary), rather than putting a lot of money into a better system. Your scrivener suggests we need new and other ‘sound system techs’.

RECOMMENDATION. There was a great deal of discussion of making all congregants feel welcome during b’nai mitzvot (although there does not appear to be any level of animus between so-called ‘regulars’ and b’nai mitzvah families as had been anecdotally reported). There appears to be some consensus that a better balance needs to be achieved of Aliyahs reserved for b’nai mitzvah families versus being available for congregants. Many thought a general reduction in the number of honors for b’nai mitzvah families was appropriate, however, there was a recognition that some weeks there are more Yahrzeits than on other weeks (such that this is not a ‘real’ issue on all weeks). Additionally, the Beth Am President’s presentation to a bar mitzvah kid is perceived by some as redundant and unnecessary.

RECOMMENDATION. A variety of Friday evening services need to be offered throughout the year, ranging from standard Kabbalat Shabbats, to musical services (Carlbach or B’nai Jeshurun-style), to spiritually-oriented evenings (different prayers, readings, “exercises”), to educational services (or services with an educational component: speaker, Torah study, etc). Requests are that some services be tied to a meal, to make things easier for families. Also, time needs to be considered because 6pm is too early if a meal is not served and something around 7 or 8pm is a lot easier for many. One option to consider is doing concurrent services Friday evening (one for kids and one for adults) because this would allow the children to have a short kid-oriented learning service while not keeping parents and children separated for an extended amount of time. There was a specific request for a Kabbalat Shabbat service run by congregants in private homes and at Beth Am occasionally with a babysitter to meet the needs of families who need a kid-friendly environment not found in all private homes. It was noted that there is a Kabbalat Shabbat group that currently gathers in a private home once a month on a Friday evening for dinner and learning, but there is not a service tied to this, and not all homes are kid-friendly.

RECOMMENDATION. Consider adding casual post-service (Shabbat afternoon) study sessions, lay-led study sessions at any time during the month, learning sessions tied to a Havdalah or Friday evening service, or other learning opportunities geared towards general Jewish learning (not necessarily Torah study). There is a strong desire for congregants to enhance their Jewish understanding in regards to current events or other issues they deem relevant to their daily lives.

RECOMMENDATION. Include more social and outdoor activities to increase members’ sense of community. Many participants in discussions referenced the recent 30th Anniversary celebration dinner & dance as a great example of this. Others referenced the musical weekend and other events to take advantage of our location as a community center. There were also requests for hikes, bike rides and other outdoor activities, as well as day trips to nearby cities and museums, not necessarily with a Jewish component, but just to get Beth Am-ers together.

RECOMMENDATION. While not articulated by a large number of congregants, there certainly is a vocal small group that wants increasing congregational participation in the service (e.g., having parts of the service be led by congregants, d'vrai torah by some of our eminent members, etc.), possibly even when there is a bar mitzvah and certainly for Family Services.

RECOMMENDATION. A series of changes to religious services have already been implemented while the process of the RSTF has progressed. These should be continued: (1) "Spirituality" gatherings, whether at people's homes or at Beth Am; (2) Young adult religious services on Friday nights; and (3) Friday night family services. These already proved to be a great success at Beth Am as indicated by the wonderful turnout at the monthly Friday night musical services a few years ago.

RECOMMENDATION. There were many ideas proposed that would increase the involvement of children in the service. Several of those ideas are worthy of further consideration and, possibly, implementation on a trial basis: (1) More joint participation by parents and children in services, such as by blessing of the children by the parents; (2) Assigning a role in chapel services to Bar/Bat Mitzvah children (such as reading Ashrei) and to their parents (such as a reading of an alternative prayer in English) in weeks/months prior to their Bar/Bat Mitzvah; (3) Preparing and assigning more Beth Am Hebrew School students to read Ashrei (it shouldn't just be day students who do this.); and ...

Continuing the theme of strong support for involving the "family" more in the family Shabbat experience, additional ideas included: (4) Continuing to give junior congregation participants the second Aliyah as a group and adding age-appropriate roles for them, especially the 11-13 year olds, after the Torah service, (e.g., singing Eyn Keyloheynu, Adon Olam, reading a prayer in English); (5) Giving an Aliyah/participation/ speaking opportunity regularly to post-bar mitzvah students and college/graduate students; (6) Giving an entire family an Aliyah/opportunity to participate together in some aspect of the service; and (7) incorporating regular presentations by our Resident Scholar at Shabbat services on an intellectually and spiritually stimulating topic of special interest to teenagers.

The Task Force notes that synagogues in New York and Boston awarded a copy of *Youth*, Matisyahu's new CD, as a door prize to select young congregants who attended services. The congregation in Boston apparently awarded the CD as part of the Hebrew school requirement for attending services to the first student who attended Shabbat services 5 times in the year. Maybe in lieu of donuts at Junior Congregation ...?

One idea Rabbi Konheim suggested was to shorten the present Shaharit (morning service), which all would attend, then to split those present into worship groups that would meet concurrently in different parts of the sanctuary/building, for a learner's minyan, or a Torah service and sermon, or a children's story hour/tot Shabbat, followed by an inclusive/singing of Musaf in which the entire congregation would participate.

RECOMMENDATION. Keep Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a memorable day for the family involved, but there is no need for Rabbi to give a lengthy sermon after all the speeches, unless his message will be particularly meaningful ... Also, attempt to limit the number of and length of special speeches. Alternative readings could be assigned to some of the family members in lieu of a speech by them and in order to help guests understand and keep up with the service.

RECOMMENDATION. The concept of a “bar mitzvah year” needs to be more fully developed for b’nai mitzvah families. Many parents expressed frustration that they did not know what the expectations were and or what the schedules would be for the synagogue. More and additional organization and communication is required.

RECOMMENDATION. Among the ideas most broadly advocated by participants in the RSTF is that Junior Congregation is not working. There is a perceived need to change the junior congregation service to make it more appealing to participants and to connect it more closely with the Family Services in the sanctuary. The professional staff is already working to alter the junior congregation and significant changes have begun. This issue needs to be more fully considered in light of the comments below that a Family Service without the family (i.e., the kids are downstairs) is not much of a Family Service in the traditions of Beth Am.

RECOMMENDATION. Tot Shabbat works and should be continued! There was some discussion about adding more prayer to the program and about suitability of venue. Both of these should be pursued with those involved in this highly successful program.

RECOMMENDATION. There is no possible way that this simple status report can completely report the many and varied views of ‘melodies and music’ at Beth Am. While there is, generally, a perceived debate characterized as “preserve old not ‘singable’ versus participation of congregation” it is likely much more complicated than that ... first and overwhelmingly, participants like and support the Cantor and his music! (i) There is certainly a significant group that would like CDs of the melodies we use (of prayers, blessings and hymns in Shabbat services) so that they can learn the service at home and in their cars. (ii) As an education effort, there are congregants who would like exposure to different and varied musical treatments of the same prayer, blessings and hymns, and some thought that this might make a unique presentation in lieu of a sermon. (iii) Another educational program in lieu of a sermon, one late summer Shabbat, could be an introduction to the music of the High Holidays.

Additionally, there is a vocal minority who want to move the choir to the rear of those assembled when we have a ‘small’ service in the sanctuary.

There are some who would like to explore alternatives to Beth Am’s Eastern European musical roots, in particular, on Friday nights. Possibly this would be lay led?

RECOMMENDATION. Distribute calendars as soon as possible! People plan early, often months in advance, so if Beth Am wants to be on that calendar, the current monthly calendar (usually arriving after the month has begun) does not do it. An annual calendar with a quarterly update

should be considered. Also importantly, the weekly email should both arrive earlier in the week and ‘advertise’ what the sermon will be or what the Parsha is, so that congregants might read the email and decide whether they want to come to services.

RECOMMENDATION. Accepting that education, literacy and the transmission of that knowledge are pillars of what we do at Beth Am, including how we pray, it is suggested that the Rabbi consider expanding the time in the Shabbat service dedicated to discussion or to the sermon. And that, as regularly and often as possible, there be a component of Torah study and, in particular, study of the Parsha. There has been a marked and significant reduction in this type of activity since the departure of Paul Caplan. If this is not something the Rabbi wants to personally lead, possibly scholars (from Baltimore Hebrew University, and the like) could be solicited, or it could be lay led, for what might be “First Shabbat of the Month Torah Study” during services. At a minimum there is interest in an expanded introduction to the weekly Parsha. And all of this activity should be geared to the non-Torah sophisticated congregant.

RECOMMENDATION. There were requests for Saturday evening events, both religious and non-religious. Havdalah services tied to Jewish Meditation (which has already begun with Roy Ringel’s institution of a Meditation Minyan), or Torah study, a guest speaker, a musical evening, or some sort of socialization (movie night, or an event like the 30th Anniversary Dance party)

RECOMMENDATION. A small group of people (apparently at least partially inspired by a Beth Am marketing effort) expressed the desire for a regular minyan. While there aren’t enough people for an ongoing and well-supported minyan, it is an idea that should remain on the table until such time as it has greater support.

RECOMMENDATION. Avodah and ongoing Social Action projects are greatly desired by some. People especially want social action programs not tied to religious school programming (from which they feel excluded). It is very important to people that they be able to get involved in something which is ongoing and has a community-empowering result, rather than short-term cleanups a few times a year which don’t lead to the community’s ability to help itself in the future. Some other suggestions are collecting unopened goods to bring to a food bank during the sale of chametz and helping to regularly clean up and plant/green the neighborhood once or twice monthly in conjunction with neighbors.

RECOMMENDATION. Improve member retention and education by assigning a “mentor” or family to new members. This mentor would invite the new member to events at Beth Am and in their home, and could help those not familiar with services

RECOMMENDATION. Help those not familiar with services and home rituals with Sunday morning “how-to” sessions: how to lead Havdalah, Friday evening rituals/blessings, procedures & blessings for aliyahs and other honors (dressing the Torah). Possible weekend retreats: Hebrew for adults, choreography of the service, etc.

RECOMMENDATION. Holidays need more adult-oriented efforts. Many holidays seem geared towards kids, and currently it seems as if the Yom Kippur martyrology is the “signature event”

for adults (although this is Not a universally popular event). Provide more study/learning and adult-level spiritual learning for holidays. One idea: choose your own lulav & etrog day

RECOMMENDATION. Education related to religious school could help enhance parent-child learning. Specifically, a “parent coordinator” would be a lay leader who follows the curriculum and plans parent learning sessions tied to kids’ learning. This would be especially helpful for parents when kids are learning things they don’t know, like Friday evening blessings, holiday info, prayers, etc.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations in this status report were gleaned from the more than 180 ideas recorded during the nearly year long work of the RSTF. Almost all involved seem to agree that *an infusion of passion and commitment is the top priority*, however it is achieved.

The recommendations should be viewed, in light of the fact that there is no call for any wholesale restructuring of religious services at Beth Am in order to satisfy the many congregant constituencies. *The state of religious services at Beth Am is good.*

The Task Force has articulated in this status report much of the dialogue, from a variety of forums, taking place over this past year. That information is provided to the Executive Committee for referral to the Board of Trustees for their action, as they see fit. We then look to the existing Beth Am committees (Religious Services, Adult Education, Youth Education, etc.), each reporting to the Board of Trustees, and in concert with the professional staff, to continue addressing the ever-changing and evolving needs of our constituencies and to continue assessing our programs.

Religious Services Task Force Members

Over 150 Beth Am members participated in the work of the RSTF. Below is a compilation of the Task Force members, many of whom offered significant time and expertise to this work effort:

Miriam Avins
Joshua Bender
Lisa Blumenthal
Emily Demsky
Eliza Feller
Henry Feller
Reneé Feller
Elaine Freeman
Joanne Gold
Steven Gore
Cantor Greenstein
Bonnie Guralnick
Steven Himmelrich
Jim Jacobs
Matthew Joseph
Stuart Kaplow
Rabbi Konheim
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Joe Menashe
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Desiree Robinson
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Jodi Segal
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