

Many Ways to Worship

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When I was a newly ordained rabbi, the “worship war,” as I called it, plagued historic congregations like ours with a multigenerational membership. Longtime members were devoted to services “as they had always been,” meaning for a few decades. At the same time, Jewish teens and young adults wanted their synagogue services to feel more like the worship experiences that had moved their spirits at camp.

Sometimes, the conflict was harsh. In 1992, when I arrived in San Antonio, the music was intoned by four singers, clad in black robes and accompanied by an organ. The singers were hired professionals, not Jewish or members of a Temple family. Some openly mocked them, which was exceedingly unkind to skilled singers who were only doing what they were employed to do. Then, if a service followed a different style, using a guitar and with more Hebrew, longtime members would complain that they were being robbed of **their** Temple. Some even claimed that more Hebrew in worship would “take us back to Poland,” to a primitive condition before the advent of Reform.

During my rabbinical school years, I fought my own worship war with my maternal grandmother. Twin boys who had been campers of mine were preparing for their B’nai Mitzvah at our Temple. They intended to wear a *kipah* and *tallit*—a head covering and prayer shawl—which were not then customary at our Houston congregation then. As a member of the congregation’s Ritual and Music Committee, my grandmother infamously proclaimed, “They can wear their *yarmulkes* and prayer shawls if they like—Beth Yeshurun, the Conservative synagogue, is right down the street!”

When the rabbi generously invited me to offer a Friday night sermon, I repaid his kindness by lecturing all assembled, notably including my grandmother. I explained that we practice Reform, not “reformed,” Judaism. The process of reform was not one-and-done. We are consistently adapting our worship practice to balance fidelity to our heritage with the needs of each generation. If we insisted on doing things the way they had “always” been done, we would simply be establishing a new orthodoxy.

Deuteronomy does just that, particularly in this week’s portion. Earlier in the Torah, we learned that Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot were observed in all the

communities where the Israelites lived. In this week's portion, by contrast, we read that festival sacrifices were to be made only at the Temple in Jerusalem.ⁱ

Deuteronomy was written to support a reform instituted by a Josiah, King of Judea in the seventh century B.C.E. Josiah sought to unify the kingdom and steer the people away from idolatry by requiring that all Israelites bring their sacrifices to Jerusalem, the capital city.ⁱⁱ

The biblical Book of Second Kings extols Josiah's righteous rule, arguing, for example, that he reestablished the observance of Passover after the festival had been ignored for about four centuries.ⁱⁱⁱ The Kingdom of Israel, north of Judea, had been conquered by the Assyrians. Idolatry was rampant. At least some of the priests, scattered across the kingdom, had given in to people's lust for idolatry. Josiah's reform preserved our tradition into another generation, enabling its later transmission to us and to billions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims worldwide. At the same time, sacrificial worship of Adonai would be reclassified as idolatry if not carried out in the Jerusalem Temple.

That worship would be suspended for a half century when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in 586 B.C.E., and it would come to an end when the Romans demolished the Temple in 70 C.E. Our Talmudic sages instituted תפילה במקום עבודה, prayer in the place of sacrificial worship.^{iv} The offerings of our lips would replace sacrifices from the herds, flocks, and fields.

You might think, then, that the Talmud lays out specifics about how these prayers were to be conducted—that is, how Jews in every land and in every age ought to worship. However, in the ninth century, a Jewish community in Spain sent a question all the way to a sage in Babylon, Rabbi Amram Gaon, asking about the order of the Jewish worship service. Amram did not respond by telling those Spanish Jews that they were ignoramuses, that everybody should know the well-established ritual for Jewish worship. Instead, he sent them a detailed response, the first Jewish prayerbook on record.

Across the next millennium, various segments of the Jewish world established a variety of ways of worshiping, all based on Amram's prayerbook. Over time, rituals evolved, developing differently from place to place, century to century. Only in the 1800s, with the advent of Reform Judaism, did anybody realize and admit that they were changing worship.

Responding to Reform, Orthodox Judaism was established with the principle, "Innovation is prohibited by the Torah." Specifically, a rabbi named the Hatam Sofer wrote that "Praying in a language other than the holy tongue [(Hebrew)] is completely impermissible." The Hatam Sofer was forced to admit

that Talmudic sages had permitted prayer in other languages, but he insisted, with scant evidence, that they only intended that permission to be temporary.^v

This week's portion demonstrates that the Hatam Sofer was mistaken. Far from being forbidden, innovation is a **characteristic** of the Torah! Josiah instituted new regulations about worship, and our people have been innovating ever since.

Our service tonight has resembled long-standing practice at Congregation B'nai Israel—depending, of course, on one's definition of “long-standing.” On Shabbat mornings in the library, our worship style looks nothing like what we do most Friday nights in the Sanctuary. Moreover, Cantor Dubov and the Ronnel Fund have empowered us to explore Jewish spirituality as it is emerging and growing today. Last week, for example, we meditated musically with the psalms traditionally associated with *Kabbalat Shabbat*, welcoming the Sabbath.

Four years ago, in the depths of the pandemic, as we planned for High Holy Days in ways we had never imagined, my teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, Professor Emeritus of Liturgy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, encouraged my colleagues and me to let go of many of the “rules” we had been taught—some of them, by him—as we designed meaningful worship in unprecedented circumstances. He “gave us permission” to skip some prayers we might have been taught as essential to every worship service, a flexibility he urged us to embrace even after returning in-person.

Judaism has been enriched and preserved in every age by priests, prophets, and sages, rabbis, cantors, and lay leaders, who have declined to be stuck in “the way we've always done it.” All have sung traditional words to new melodies and revised the words to ancient tunes, making our tradition come alive in every age. Let us embrace innovation and experimentation, mindful of the psalmist's urging: שירו ליהוה שיר חדש, “Sing a new song to God.”^{vi} Then, may the Holy One will hear our prayers and find them pleasing.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 16:2, for example.

ⁱⁱ Dudley Weinberg and W. Gunther Plaut, “Introducing Deuteronomy,” in *The Torah A Modern Commentary*, Revised Edition, New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005, pp. 1141-1147.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 1143.

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 26a.

^v Responsa Hatam Sofer 6:84.

^{vi} Psalms 96:1.