

Rabbi Lewis' Message for April 2009

The Ritual Committee, with [Board](#) approval, recently decided to change the time for Friday night services to 7:30 in the hope that it would be easier for younger families to join us. We will evaluate that change in coming months. In an attempt to be responsive to the needs of the entire congregation, the Committee frequently revisits the question of the optimal time and day on which services should be conducted. These recent conversations inspired the following thoughts that I shared as an introduction to our 6 p.m. service for Shabbat Across America.

I grew up going to the "late" Friday evening service. I didn't know it was "late" at the time; to me, it was the normal time service. My father would come home from work. We would eat Shabbat dinner. And we would go to the 8 o'clock service. I didn't learn until years later that the "late" Friday evening service had been a recent Reform innovation in this country.

I was living in Jerusalem when I learned there was another way. By about 2 p.m on Friday, the city shut down. Just before sunset, I could look out my window and see people dressed for Shabbat walking in the direction of their synagogues. They had lit their candles at home and were going to a service called Kabbalat Shabbat - a service that welcomed the Sabbath, a service I would have called an "early" service.

The service began with the singing of psalms, one for each day of the week. Its highlight was the singing of Lecha Dodi, a poetic and prayerful welcoming of the Sabbath bride. The service was virtually all music, followed by a short Ma'ariv service (the usual evening service beginning with the Barchu and concluding with Kaddish). There was no sermon and no Torah reading. When the brief service ended, everyone walked home to a leisurely Shabbat dinner.

I learned that the early Friday night service was actually an ancient custom. This special preliminary portion called Kabbalat Shabbat had been introduced somewhat later by the 16th century Kabbalists in the city of Tzfat in northern Israel. The kabbalists would dress in white and go out to the fields to welcome the Sabbath Bride. I learned to love this way of welcoming Shabbat in services and of going home afterwards to a leisurely Shabbat dinner.

Where did the tradition of the late Friday night service come from? It was an American innovation. This country presented new challenges to that early Kabbalat Shabbat service. The Industrial Revolution and upward mobility changed things. Not all Jews lived within walking distance of the Temple. The American work schedule conflicted with people's need to get home in time for an early Friday night service. The secular world offered additional competition for the early religious experience.

The American creative solution was this: move the Friday evening service to a later hour, after Shabbat dinner. It seemed contradictory: it meant you were welcoming the Sabbath bride later in the evening after the Shabbat meal when she had already been waiting for you for a few hours. It preserved the institution of the Shabbat dinner although it meant that there was no relaxed post-meal family time at home on Shabbat evening. But as Abraham Millgram writes in his book about the Sabbath, "Life...proved stronger than logic." And the new oneg Shabbat after services provided compensatory time to catch up on the doings of the community. This new late service seemed to work for many years, although it, too, presents scheduling conflicts for many families.

We continue to struggle with the idea that there is a magical perfect time that is right for a Friday night service. Tradition would argue that the perfect time is sundown, when Shabbat begins. Whatever scheduling decisions we make - early or late - they will be perfect for some and imperfect for others. How can we preserve the precious ritual of Shabbat dinner at home and still encourage families to attend services on Friday night? How do we help our families with these Jewish choices? I suspect the answer lies less in whether services are early or late and more in our own decision-making about where Shabbat services belong on our own personal priority list.

On Shabbat Across America, we started services early, before dinner, as our ancestors did for so many generations. This year, we did only that preliminary portion of the service we call Kabbalat Shabbat as a way of exposing the congregation to a ritual we don't usually have time for. We didn't pray the usual Barchu, Shma, and Amidah, although we concluded with Kaddish. We sang our way through those ancient psalms and then went downstairs for a leisurely Shabbat dinner. After dinner, we sang zemirot led by Cantor Kadin and guitar. It felt like having Shabbat dinner with family. Everyone said: we should do this more often. If we did, would you come?

Rabbi Ellen Lewis