

## Rabbi Lewis' Message for May 2009

*This column continues the theme of last month's message (about the time of Friday night services) in the hopes of encouraging further conversation and feedback.*

I learned the Torah service by osmosis. My family went to the 8 p.m. Friday night service when I was a child. I heard Torah read every week on Friday night (although I am sure Torah was also read on Shabbat mornings, but that wasn't when my family went). I don't recall the length of the service. I know we used the old Union Prayer Book, a small book whose liturgy was so abbreviated that the service could not have been too long.

From a traditional perspective, Torah is read only on Shabbat mornings (and of course on holidays), never on Friday night. Because our congregation does not have regular services on Shabbat mornings, our tradition has been to read Torah on Friday nights. In order to accommodate both the Torah reading and a sermon, we have abbreviated the liturgy.

Since January, we have been praying from **Mishkan T'filah**, a more accessible prayer book that offers us lovely new translations and interpretations as well as transliteration of the Hebrew. Over the past few months, we have been experimenting with how to use this book. We have cut the Friday night service (eliminating most of the beautiful psalms from kabbalat Shabbat) as closely as we can, while maintaining both a Torah service and a sermon. The length is still about an hour and a half. Since we have been starting earlier, that means we begin at 7:30 and finish at 9 before heading downstairs to the oneg Shabbat.

We could leave things as they stand, but if we do so, I think we might be missing an opportunity for a productive exchange about all the possible alternatives and the implications of these choices. As our conversation has progressed over the recent months, it has become clear that any discussion about the time of services can't be held in a vacuum. The underlying question is this: What are the values that should guide us in making these decisions?

When I first joined this congregation fifteen years ago, the board impressed one clear value on me and that was the value of community. They told me seriously that if I planned to teach adult education Friday night during the oneg Shabbat, I would not be hired. That was the only time the congregation got together during the week, they said. People live in different towns and don't just run into each other. We need this time to catch up with each other.

This is a congregation that has always taken seriously what it means to be together. Other congregations that are larger often offer a variety of service choices. That isn't something we have done here at the Center. We have felt that we are too small to split into smaller interest groups. Some years ago, we did make the decision to offer family services on the High Holy Days, but admittedly that was an attempt to thin out the crowd and allow more open seats at the later services.

So any decision about what time services should begin must include the question of how it will affect the sense of community. Should we alternate times on Friday nights, having one service a month begin at 6 and the other begin at 7:30? Where will the young children have an opportunity to meet the older members if we offer a 6 p.m. family service instead of a 7:30 p.m. service? Should we add in Shabbat morning services where Torah can be read comfortably without the concern that the children are staying up too late? Should we eliminate Torah readings on Friday night? If we did that, when would the children (never mind the adults) hear Torah read? Should we eliminate the sermon on Friday night (I don't take any of this personally, so feel free to be honest with your opinions)? How much liturgy can we cut before we have made too large a spiritual sacrifice?

All of these suggestions need to be evaluated in the light of our values. The [Religious Practices Committee](#) has taken seriously the recommendations you have offered. It seems to me and to the committee members that these decisions are serious enough to involve you, the entire congregation, in the ongoing discussion. So let's keep talking.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis