

When I arrived here at WJC nearly 26 years ago, there was work to be done concerning the manner in which we prayed. Specifically, the role of women had to expand and ultimately, we had to become an egalitarian synagogue. This was not simple. While many favored this radical change, many others, including the Rabbi emeritus, did not.

The transition was successful. It was so for five of reasons. I share them with you not because I want to take you on a stroll down memory lane, but because they are very instructive to our present moment. Two factors were external to us. Three were internal.

First of all, the change was very late in coming. We were not pioneering anything new. In fact, for most people the reaction was not so much "wow, what a change!" as "what took you so long?" It is easy to make a change when you're pretty much the last one to do it.

Second, there was some degree of a moral imperative. Feminism had made its mark on American society to such a point that gender discrimination (of almost any kind) was considered to be unethical behavior.

Third, we were very sensitive, to the extent possible, to the feelings of those who disagreed with the decision. There was going to be no alternative. Therefore, whenever possible, we did not (and continue not to) count women who do not wish to be counted in a minyan. We did not give aliyot to men when a woman would be having the aliyah just before or after. It didn't always work because it wasn't always possible. But people knew we tried.

Fourth, we launched an unprecedented anti - Lashon Harah campaign. Change always inspires lashon harah. And so, from the pulpit and in our classes, people heard, over and over again, about the enormous danger of gossip – how painful it can be to people – how destructive it can be to a community. And for the most part – everyone understood.

Finally, even in the face of this serious change, we reaffirmed our deep commitment to traditional davening – to the traditional form and content of our prayers and our prayer book. We reaffirmed our commitment to traditional Torah learning both in theology and in practice. In fact, we added some prayers to our liturgy in keeping with a more traditional manner.

For a generation, this has been our hallmark. Many of us have raised our children in this sanctuary and in this worldview of prayer and Torah. We have embraced the language of our tradition, and with it, the great theological joys and challenges. We have trained ourselves and our children to pray in manner that allows us and them to be connected to every traditional congregation in any community in every part of the world.

This is what we have built over 25 years. I am very proud of it and I will not abandon it. This service is and must remain the centerpiece of the prayer life of our community. And I want to assure everyone here today that it will.

But before I move from the past to the future, I want to share one story from 23 years ago. It is a story that I have shared privately with some of you but never publically. Some of you, of course, were there.

When the decision was made to enlarge the role of women in the shul, I sent out a note telling everyone to come to shul on a particular Shabbes. The sermon that day would explain how we were going to proceed with the change and the Kiddush would be an opportunity for an open discussion.

The sermon went well. I knew that the majority of people agreed with me. However, I also knew that some didn't – and I knew that Rabbi Koslowe z"l was furious. I knew that because he had made it very clear to me in private conversations.

So when we came to the discussion at the Kiddush, my nightmare began to unfold. After all the yasher koachs, a couple of people who opposed the decision rose to ask how Rabbi Koslowe z"l felt about this. I was quite sure that I was in big trouble. Rabbi Koslowe z"l stood up and said, "For 43 years, when I led this congregation, I told you that in such matters we follow the decisions of the rabbi. The rabbi has told us what is going to be and we are going to do just that." The he sat down.

For the next 10 years, until his death, Rabbi Koslowe z"l davened with us.

I am telling you this story not just because it is extraordinarily self serving. I am telling it now because twenty years later, I can now hear something else in Rabbi Koslowe's words that I did not or could not hear back then. Twenty three years ago, all I heard was what he was saying to you. What I hear now is what he was saying to me. To you, it was a message of respect. To me he was speaking of responsibility. Now I am hearing him say, "It's your call. You have to say and mean it. Remember, people's souls are in your hands. We will follow you – but you shoulder that burden."

And it is with that in mind that I now continue.

In the past 8 months, we have introduced a number of different prayer experiences. These include the Meditative Service, Mostly Musaf, and Rhythm and Ruach. The choice of meditation and musicality did not come from nowhere. These two things have become staples in the spirituality of our time. Across the spectrum, in all denominations of Judaism, the primacy of music and mindful silence is sweeping through congregations.

With regard to the music, I enacted a significant change at our shul. While reaffirming that the use of musical instruments on Shabbat is forbidden on the basis of Jewish law, I recognized that an exception can be made in the context of worship inside the synagogue. I sent to everyone two essays which outline my thinking on this matter.

Some people have asked why? What brought these innovations about?

I think, more than anything else, it was coming to terms with the fact that as wonderful as our Shabbat services have been, they were not for everyone. The problem was not that there was, or is, a deficiency in the service – and neither is there or was there a deficiency in those who could not relate to it. However, I thought, years ago, that a synagogue's ideology was to be reflected in its Shabbat service, and one size should fit all. One service would unite us – we would be one family – everyone included equally - singing the same songs – davening the same prayers.

I now realize that I was wrong. 'One size fits all' is not inclusive. In fact, it is just the opposite. It does not bring everyone under the same umbrella – it excludes those who, for whatever reason, cannot or will not participate – and leaves them outside the tent with no other option.

This thought has been validated recently. Since I sent out the essays, I have had many responses. Though a few have been negative, the vast majority of them have been positive. Interestingly, many people thought that the positive responses would have come from the youngest members of the shul. In fact, I received very few responses from the young members. The positive reaction came from people who are my age who were thanking me for opening doors that I had closed to them in the past. Clearly, one size did not fit all. We closed out a lot of people, and now it is time to invite them back.

I have also come to believe that 'one size fits all' is, to some extent, both born from and breeds some degree of intolerance. In the past few years, the issue of intolerance has become important to my thinking. I have become more aware of those who are intolerant of me and I have also become aware of my intolerance of others. I preach tolerance – sometimes very eloquently, but I regret that my practice has not always conformed to my words.

As my spiritual life has always been one of growth and change, it has led me to become more traditional in my practice of Judaism. Yet, as found myself feeling more and more comfortable with the passion and fervor of the yeshiva world of Orthodoxy, I also became less and less comfortable with their intolerance. So a few years ago, I decided to explore the other end of the spectrum. I placed myself squarely in the world of Renewal Judaism - of mysticism and meditation. In that world, I also saw passion and joy and meaning in Jewish expression. However, I found no less intolerance. The words and accusations were different, but the intolerance was the same on both sides.

So I now understand that all the prayers, and all the niggunim, and all kavanah will not strengthen the Jewish people if we do not allow ourselves to see the beauty and joy of the other. And I realized that I cannot change the Jewish world. But I can change one small corner of it.

As I said, the spiritual centerpiece of our synagogue is this traditional Shabbat morning service – and I do not want that to change. However, I no longer want this service to be our only hallmark. I want us to become a place where there are different portals to Jewish spiritual expression. Some of them may not be entirely comfortable to everyone – but that is the point. We can learn to be tolerant and respectful of that which is out of our comfort zone. More importantly, we can grow spiritually from the experience. Indeed, my own experience is that when I left my traditional comfort zone, my Renewal experience made my traditionalism more meaningful. It is also true that the traditionalism that I brought to my Renewal world, even to those who I teach today, enhances their meditative prayer experience. I believe that I need not be alone in this feeling. We are not competing – we are complementing.

And we can be successful if we follow the course that we took over two decade ago.

It may not be as prevalent or as obvious as egalitarianism, but to me there is a moral imperative called tolerance. In the language of Judaism it is called “dan l’chaf z’chut – giving people the benefit of the doubt,” or seeing the “Tzad Hatov – the good side” of a person or a situation. It is recognizing that there may be great value and joy and meaning even in those things that are outside of our comfort zone.

And though we may not enjoy the ease of being one of the last in this regard, we have the excitement and the honor of being one of the first. This is not just about our synagogue; it is about the Jewish people. We are a small percentage of the Jewish world, but what a difference a few hundred or a few thousand people can make if we train ourselves and set an example of tolerance and inclusion for our children and for those who will see us.

But for our shul to accomplish this, we must be sensitive. Today we are more sensitive than we were 23 years ago. Today, every innovation, particularly musical instruments, will be ONLY as an alternative to this service. No one who is uncomfortable davening in such a setting will ever have to do so. As I said, this traditional service will remain the centerpiece of our spiritual Center. Our goal is to be a family – a true family. In a true family, people are different – they pursue different dreams and take different paths. Yet they are bound together by mutual respect and sensitivity and they take advantage of sharing and learning from each other.

And this sensitivity leads to concern with Lashon Harah. Many of you have said to me that there is a malaise lurking in our shul. Where do you think that malaise comes from? Did it come from a disagreement about a decision or a policy? No, such disagreements happen all the time. Malaise comes only from Lashon Harah. We have been seeing with our own eyes how destructive lashon harah can be.

And the saddest part is that it is beneath us – it is beneath our greatness and our dignity as individuals and as a congregation. Lashon Harah is not who we have ever been and it is never what we should be. I ask you to remember that change – any change – always inspires Lashon Harah. Yet we are all capable of resisting the temptation. Our first impulse must be to see the good and give the benefit of the doubt. Moreover, we can learn and find nachas in the Jewish expression of another Jew. This, to me, is lesson that we must teach our children and indeed, the whole Jewish world.

I want to leave you with two thoughts.

First, I know that some of you will feel uncomfortable. But what I have learned in my journey is the within our comfort zone, we can attain spiritual satisfaction. However, it is only when we leave our comfort zone, if only for a moment, that we will be attain spiritual growth. Together we can create a space within these walls where both spiritual satisfaction as well as spiritual growth will be attained.

Second, people have spoken to me about the snowball effect and the slippery slope. I agree, we have to be aware of the snowball effect. But what I've come to realize, and what I have come to teach you today, is that every barrier that we erect to keep the snowball from sliding down also keeps a climber from going up. True, we cannot include everything – we have an halachic process to help us make those decisions, but we can be smart and we do not have to live in fear of the snowball effect.

A final word of Torah. Today we read Parshat Vayikra, the first parsha in the Book of Leviticus. Last week, the Book of Exodus ended in a most unusual way. The Tabernacle was complete. The Torah tells us that God filled it to such an extent that Moses could not enter. So ends the book.

Then, as Leviticus begins, God calls Moses (Vayikra) to enter the Tabernacle. It must be that God made Himself smaller; for how else would there be any room for Moses. Indeed there is a profound concept in Judaism called "tzimtzum," which means "to contract, to draw within ourselves." It suggests that we, like God, are capable of filling all the space in our lives. And yet, if we wish to attain meaning and joy through relationships, then we, like God, have to make room for another. We do this by making ourselves smaller when we take a spouse or when we decide to have children. Yes, we are making ourselves smaller so that they can enter, but we make our lives 'bigger' because they are there.

This process, as we know, is not easy. Perhaps that is why God had to teach us by example. The greatness of our God lies not in how vast He is, but in His desire to be a little smaller in order to let us in. May we, as individuals and as a community, be worthy of God's example.

Shabbat Shalom.