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■ GUIDELINES FOR WORSHIP/RITUAL COMMITTEES

INTRODUCTION

These guidelines have been designed to help your Worship/Ritual Committee work effectively and meaningfully. We hope that they will inspire you to open or deepen the exploration and experience of worship in your congregation, including communal study and dialogue, reflection and experimentation.

As Rabbi Eric Yoffie has noted, “Reform Judaism is ever-evolving” (UAHC General Assembly, 1999). Every Union for Reform Judaism member congregation has a distinct history, communal personality and style of prayer that reflect its uniqueness, while at the same time each Union synagogue is linked to Reform Judaism through philosophy, values and practices that can be expressed through its worship. The process of congregational dialogue that is outlined in *Iv’du B’simchah: Worship with Joy* is intended to help each community reflect on its prayer style in the context of Reform and Jewish liturgy and the life of its synagogue. We hope that this shared learning will help you to articulate, design and fulfill your congregation’s aspirations for communal worship.

Variety is a defining feature of Reform Judaism today. Just as no uniform approach to worship exists in the Reform Movement, neither is there a single, correct model for a Worship/Ritual Committee. A wide variety of committee structures can be found among our congregations. However, one common element characterizes all successful Worship/Ritual Committees: In its own way, each committee provides a venue for clergy and congregants to partner and engage in substantive issues about their own worship through dynamic study and discussion. We hope that each Worship/Ritual Committee will achieve this objective in its own way, with lasting and gratifying results for the entire congregation.

The work of this committee begins with three significant commitments that help to establish a firm foundation for its future actions: taking worship seriously; building a clergy-congregational partnership; and recognizing that change is difficult.

TAKING WORSHIP SERIOUSLY

One should never stand up to pray without appropriate seriousness. In fact, the pious ones used to meditate one hour before praying and would ask God to help them during that time to focus their hearts on the task.

Mishnah B’rachot 5:1

This ancient teaching can challenge and inform our contemporary approach to worship. It offers an ideal to all Jews, irrespective of our educational level, state of mind or communal role. While such dramatic preparation or piety might not be possible for each of us on a regular basis, everyone can grasp the dedication, focus and intention that are being described. So, if we can imagine it, we can strive to integrate some of those values into our own preparation for and practice of worship. In our own day, effective prayer demands preparation of the mind and heart; awareness of text and music; attention to communal atmosphere and physical setting.

Any Worship/Ritual Committee that embarks on the journey of studying worship and liturgy should acknowledge that Jewish worship represents the intersection of energetic personal focus and shared communal language. It involves seeking comfort and challenge as well as reliability and relevance in our congregational prayers. As Dr. Jakob Petuchowski taught, Jewish prayer embodies two elements in natural tension: *keva*—fixed, regular aspects—and *kavanah*—temporal, personal qualities. The members of this committee should be ready to learn and to listen with curious minds and honest hearts. At its best, the learning and labor of the Worship/Ritual Committee should be both personal and communal, historical and contemporary, local and global, grounding and aspirational.

Providing for and sustaining communal worship represent core responsibilities of a congregation. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman describes the power of worship to transform each of us:

Liturgies that work do more than entertain: They make moral demands on us that transcend the similar claim of dramas in general. We are expected to take the liturgical message home with us, internalized in our psyche. The liturgical drama doesn't end with the final song of benediction. Our day-to-day lives testify to liturgical success when we act out the message of our prayers in moral behavior.

The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 1999, p. 241

Worship is, as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes, “a primary Jewish act.” It is therefore crucial for each member of your Worship/Ritual Committee to understand the significance of worship in Jewish life—for individuals, families and communities—and his or her role in fostering a greater appreciation of worship within your congregation.

BUILDING A CLERGY-CONGREGATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

The world is sustained by three things: Torah, *avodah* and *g'milut chasadim*—Torah, worship and deeds of loving-kindness.

Pirkei Avot 1:2

As this ancient and beloved quotation teaches, prayer is at the heart of the world's existence and of Jewish life. Throughout our people's history, worship has taken different forms, but it has always offered a unique opportunity to engage with God through inherited and innovative expressions in the company and support of community. Providing for and sustaining communal worship is at the core of a congregation's responsibilities to its members.

Jewish worship is a carefully choreographed, multilayered experience that invites both reflection and communication, with a special emphasis on dialogue, between individuals and God; between prayer leaders and congregants; and between community members. Once we recognize this inherent dialogue, it becomes easier to see the need for partnership—a collaborative spirit—between clergy and congregants, who together are charged with nurturing communal worship.

For too long, the roles of clergy and congregational members in worship have been compartmentalized: Many congregants have grown to assume (and embrace) a passive role in worship,

expecting clergy to be performers rather than prayer leaders. Often clergy have understood their unique leadership role to mean that they must carry sole responsibility for all aspects of the community's prayer experience. At the same time, Worship/Ritual Committees have been allowed to lie dormant or disappear, or perhaps they have taken on trivial tasks instead of being a forum for true partnership. A more collaborative model could enhance the worship experience for both clergy and congregants:

Collaboration is the word that best captures this experience of working together to craft worship. Collaborators are “co-laborers.” They contribute from the field of their own gifts and passions. But they do not labor in isolation. Their labors are so interwoven that the final product is a composite. A group effort is genuinely the product of the entire group, not merely a modified solo plan.

Norma deWaal Malefyt and Howard Vanderwell,
Designing Worship Together: Models and Strategies for Worship Planning.
Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005, p. 3

The Worship/Ritual Committee can become a center for shared learning and “co-labor,” as defined above. Clergy are experts in the area of worship: As such, they have distinct responsibilities to increase the committee's and the congregation's knowledge and to identify community members whose curiosity, energy and talents could contribute to enriched expressions of communal prayer. For their part, committee members must bring a commitment to the practice and exploration of worship—through study and regular presence at worship—and to the development of similar opportunities for the whole community.

RECOGNIZING THAT CHANGE IS DIFFICULT

One of the traditional designations for God is “rock,” ... We require some permanence. If all about us must change, we might at least count on the eternity, the immutability of God.

David Wolpe, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God*.
New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1990, p. 10

Just as certain understandings of God can offer us a sense of stability in our ever-changing world, so too do many of us look to our worship community to provide us with comfortable, familiar surroundings—with a profound sense of home. Prayer is, as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes, “emotional...a matter of the heart.” As we prepare to study Jewish liturgy, examine our communal approach to prayer and explore possibilities for experimentation, we need to be mindful of our yearnings for both stability and change. Different perspectives and priorities from congregants, committee members and clergy are inevitable, as are their different responses to innovations in your community's worship service.

The tools that follow are designed to help you begin evaluating and renewing your method of worship with care and knowledge, intention and cooperation. We are confident that your committee's work will benefit by involving other members of your congregation in the process. Two practical ways to do this are

1. To create opportunities for members to discuss the aspects of your current worship experience that are meaningful to them and

2. To make liturgical changes gradually, avoiding abrupt and dramatic shifts

Discomfort is an inevitable result of change. However, if your congregants are involved in this ongoing process, the community will be able to understand worship as both a comforting and a dynamic experience at the core of Jewish life.

SETTING UP THE COMMITTEE

Name

The names that committees have chosen include Worship, *Avodah*, Ritual, Religious Living and Religious Practices. Although choosing a name may seem to be a trivial matter, your committee's name should reflect the focus of its work and help you get its message out to the congregation. For example, using the name Worship Committee lets congregants know that this committee is involved with the prayer life of the congregation, while the name Religious Practices Committee lets congregants know that this committee's agenda extends beyond worship to include nurturing their personal spiritual journeys.

If your committee is being newly formed, reflect upon the work it will be doing. Before finalizing the committee's name, consider discussing it with the committee members and the synagogue's board. If such a committee already exists, take some time to review what it is presently doing and what its members want to address in the future. If there has been or will be a significant change in focus, consider a name change as well.

Membership

There are many models of committee membership, and each congregation will decide which works best for it. However, the following commonalities exist among successful Worship/Ritual Committees:

- Their members are a cross section of the congregation in age, years in the community and interests.
- Their clergy are active participants.
- At least one member is also a member of the Board of Trustees.
- Their members are committed to active involvement in personal and congregational religious living and study.

In some congregations the president appoints the committee members. It is important that in such congregations term limits be set so that membership is regularly revitalized. Other synagogues choose to have open committee membership. For purposes of voting, such membership is determined by attendance at three consecutive committee meetings. An open membership requires that special attention be given to encouraging broad representation and involvement.

THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

Study

For your committee to engage in knowledgeable discussions about worship and worship-related issues, regular study is essential. Study should be understood as meaningful committee work and not merely as an add-on to an already full agenda. A seventeen-session study curriculum and a

selected bibliography of worship resources have been included in this manual. The study curriculum has been designed for use during the first forty-five minutes of committee meetings.

Writing a Worship Vision Statement for Your Congregation

An important responsibility of the Worship/Ritual Committee is to draft a congregational vision of worship with the clergy. The purpose of the statement is to define your community's aims for worship, expressing the outcomes that your congregation seeks in its experience of worship and identifying the community resources that can help realize these aspirations.

It is important to remember that composing a vision for congregational worship is not the first goal of your committee! Rather, it should be a natural outcome of your study as a group and your engagement with the congregation as a whole on worship-related matters. Be assured that there is no “correct” vision for synagogue worship, and there is no vision that will last forever. Once a congregational vision has been developed, it will have to be reviewed and adjusted regularly as the congregation's worship needs change and grow. (See *Writing a Worship Vision Statement for Your Congregation*, p. 64.)

Experimentation and Discovery

If your congregation is interested in exploring different worship practices, your committee can help evaluate these practices first by studying, discussing, experimenting with and finding ways to implement such new prayer experiences. Your committee can also play an active role by searching for creative worship ideas, supporting your clergy as they integrate those ideas into congregational worship and fostering an environment in which experimentation is accepted and welcome.

Laying the Ground for Change

Any innovation in the worship experience is likely to produce some discomfort for worshipers because regular attendees often find solace in the familiarity of their synagogue's style of worship. Therefore, your committee must be actively involved in planning for change. This can be done by announcing upcoming changes in the bulletin and during services and providing educational opportunities through study sessions and sermons. Introducing changes for a preset trial period (between three and six months) is often a good way to ask people to experiment with worship.

Evaluating the Experiments

Once the trial period for a new worship practice has been completed, a full and honest evaluation should be made by the clergy, Worship/Ritual Committee members and congregation as a whole. We may have many wonderful ideas, but we must also be able to recognize when any of those ideas just doesn't work in our worship setting. It's important that we understand why certain ideas don't work and that we learn from the evaluation process.

Hach'nasat Or'chim: The Welcome

The worship experience begins the moment a worshiper enters the synagogue—some would even say the parking lot. The way in which worshipers are welcomed can make them feel that they are valued members of the community or, conversely, that they are outsiders. Whether they are longtime synagogue members or are attending their first service at the congregation, their initial impression will certainly impact their worship experience. With this in mind, some congregations have renamed their ushers and are now calling them greeters, thus emphasizing welcoming over

control as the latter's main role. The congregation may also decide to provide an orientation session and guidelines for its greeters. (A training guide for greeters is available from *Synagogue 3000* at www.synagogue3000.org. Look for information about the S2K Curriculum.)

Aliyot: Honors

Involving congregants in services through the giving of honors (e.g., opening the ark, lighting candles, making *Kiddush*, receiving an *aliyah* to the Torah) creates an atmosphere of inclusion and participation. Your committee can be helpful in determining and assigning appropriate honors. As prayer leadership skills among congregants increase, your committee can help to expand the opportunities for congregant participation in services.

Oneg Shabbat and Kiddush

The social time following Shabbat evening and Shabbat morning services is an extension of the worship experience. It allows us to reinforce and strengthen communal ties. The *Oneg Shabbat* and *Kiddush* must be planned in order to maximize this opportunity. Ask yourselves: What type of atmosphere will make people feel welcome, safe and relaxed? Carefully choosing the kinds of food to be served; determining the setup of the space; assigning members to be hosts and hostesses; and deciding whether or not to have a formal program are all part of the planning of this time.

Times of Worship

Many of our congregations are planning alternative Shabbat worship opportunities, such as earlier Shabbat evening services, more informal summer and yearlong services and added “library minyan” services held on Shabbat morning. Some congregations are able to maintain a variety of services that are led by either the clergy or lay leaders. Your committee can provide guidance in planning worship services for times that are more responsive to the changing lifestyles of your congregants.

The Siddur

As the number of available siddurim continues to grow and as the spiritual voice of our members diversifies, many congregations are exploring alternative prayer texts. The decision to do this should be based on knowledge of the liturgy and extensive experimentation with a variety of siddurim. Your congregation may also choose to use different siddurim for different services.

In the fall of 2007, the Central Conference of American Rabbis published a new Reform Movement siddur titled *Mishkan T'filah*. Support for congregations as they review and introduce this new siddur can be found at www.urj.org/mishkan.

The Language of Prayer

As our movement increases its commitment to spreading Hebrew literacy, many congregations are struggling to create a comfortable balance between the use of Hebrew and English in services. As your committee studies this issue, you may want to consider your role in creating adult Hebrew learning opportunities, using transliteration for adult non-Hebrew readers and reviewing the quality of the English texts in the prayer books that your congregation uses.

***Mikdash*: Sacred Space**

The design and furnishing of sacred space (the sanctuary, chapel, etc.) creates the environment and conveys much of the message of our worship experience. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman writes:

More than just a stage for the ritual drama being enacted within it, the worship space becomes a paradigm for the way worshipers would like to see the world as a whole. Where, for example, a religion preaches huge class or even racial divisions, it will enact a liturgy where those divisions are evident in its use of space. If it sees the world as a hierarchy of forces spiraling upward to heaven, it will develop a ritual featuring hierarchies. If, on the other hand, it preaches radical equality, it will break down spatial privileges on its liturgical stage to signal that since all are equal here before God, all must be granted the same equality outside the church or synagogue walls as well.

The Art of Public Prayer, p. 205

While most congregations have fixed sanctuary space, there are various ways to adapt the use of that space. If a congregation chooses to create new worship opportunities, the Worship/Ritual Committee will want to discuss what kind of space (the social hall, library, outside) to use that will best express the theology of the service and further its goals.

***K'lei Kodesh*: Sacred Objects**

The members of the Worship/Ritual Committee are often responsible for the upkeep of the congregation's *k'lei kodesh*—sacred objects (its Torah, Torah silver, menorah, *Kiddush* cup, etc.). It is an honor and a responsibility to maintain these items for the community. When we clean and polish the synagogue's *Kiddush* cup, we are maintaining more than just the *Kiddush* cup: The cup is a symbol of our connection to the past, to generations of Jews who have recited *Kiddush* before us. It is also a symbol of our connection to the future, to our hope that generations to come will continue to sanctify Shabbat.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: BEYOND WORSHIP

While worship is at the heart of the work of a Worship/Ritual Committee, there are other ways in which your committee can support and promote the spiritual life of your congregation.

Teaching about Worship

Just as your committee has devoted itself to study and increasing its knowledge of worship, so, too, your fellow congregants should be encouraged to learn. A variety of adult education opportunities—such as evening courses, scholar-in-residence lectures, tapes/CDs of music used during services, discussions and articles in the synagogue bulletin—should be provided. The committee should view this responsibility as a natural extension of its central mission.

Supporting Home Observance

It's not the role of your committee members to prescribe the home observances of individual congregants. You can, however, provide support to those who wish to explore a variety of Jewish ritual practices. Many Worship/Ritual Committees are doing just that by creating and distributing booklets to guide congregants in home celebrations of Shabbat and the holidays, the process of unveiling a memorial stone, the observance of shivah and the celebration of *chanukat habayit*—dedicating a new home. This is an innovative, creative and very exciting area of committee activity, one that can truly energize both committee members and congregants.

Shabbat Observance

Focusing on Shabbat observance beyond Friday night by both the community and individual congregants is another area being explored by synagogues. The Department of Worship, Music and Religious Living has developed a wide variety of materials for your use as you explore creating a truly communal Shabbat morning worship experience and to help you support congregants as they develop their own regular observance of Shabbat.

Kashrut

In recent years a growing number of our congregations have explored the meaning of kashrut for their community. Often this conversation arises when a congregation builds a new building or remodels its kitchen. You will find a study curriculum about kashrut on the Department of Worship, Music and Religious Living's website at www.urj.org/worship.

Creating Opportunities for Personal Spiritual Journeying

Many of our congregants are seeking to deepen their spiritual life: They are open to seriously exploring their relationship with God and how that relationship informs their actions. Judaism has much to teach us about the life of the spirit, and your committee can play an active role in creating a congregational culture that supports spiritual seekers. While this is a new focus for Worship/Ritual Committees, some congregations have already begun addressing spiritual journeying by inviting contributions to the bulletin, asking members to speak publicly during Shabbat and High Holy Days services and forming spiritual journey groups that meet regularly.

SELF-REFLECTION: HOW ARE WE DOING?

Just as you were encouraged to create an atmosphere in which experimentation with worship is valued, you should also endeavor to ensure that regular reflection on worship becomes part of congregational life. Such communal reflection and honest dialogue about worship should be aimed at making the worship experience more inviting to everyone.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The work of your Worship/Ritual Committee can be an opportunity, through partnership, to make wonderful things happen in the worship life of your congregation. The following commentary by Rabbi Mordecai Yosef of Izbica (d. 1854) on the building of the Tabernacle, as quoted by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, reminds us that we all have a role to play in this sacred work:

In the building of the Tabernacle, all Israel were joined in their hearts; no one felt superior to his/her fellow. At first, each skilled individual did his/her own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that his/her work was extraordinary. Afterwards, once they saw how their several contributions to the "service" of the Tabernacle were integrated, all the boards, the sockets, the curtains, and the loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized how each one of them had depended on the other. Then they understood how all they had accomplished was not by virtue of their own skill alone but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had worked on the Tabernacle.

May our hands be likewise guided and may we be privileged to create congregations in which the Presence of the Holy One dwells.