

Understanding a Shabbat Service

The Service

Saturday morning's service celebrates Shabbat rest, prayer, and learning and will be conducted in Hebrew and English. The use of Hebrew links the individual and the congregation to others throughout the world and across time. A person well versed in Hebrew prayer can walk into a synagogue in any corner of the world and, without knowing a word of the local language, feel at home.

The service is read from the *siddur*. It contains prayers that include biblical selections as well as blessings, hymns and poems that were written as long as 2000 years ago. Portions in italics are read responsively by the congregation. While the rabbi is the spiritual leader of the congregation and directs the service, the rabbi functions as a teacher and a respected guide to the congregation, not an intermediary between the congregation and God. The cantor leads the congregation in the chanting of many prayers found in the service.

The first portion of the morning service consists of a series of psalms and songs. They serve as spiritual warm-up to the morning service by setting a mood of awe and appreciation for God and Creation. The morning service proper begins with *Bar'chu*, the call to prayer that acknowledges God as creator of goodness. The prayers and songs which follow enjoin Jews to embrace God's teachings and pass God's messages on to our children. The next portion of the service is the *Amidah* (literally, standing). This is a series of blessings that form the core of all Jewish prayer services that are recited standing. After the additional prayers, songs, and blessings, the Torah is taken out of the ark and carried through the congregation and back to the *bima*, where today's Torah and Haftarah portions are read. After the *d'var Torah* is delivered, a blessing is said and the Torah is returned to the ark. The congregation continues with brief song and prayers after which the rabbi shares his/her thoughts and teachings.

At the conclusion of the service, the rabbi will ask all those present to join together for blessing said over wine and challah. This is followed by a Kiddush luncheon, to which all are invited.

The Torah Service

The Torah service involves the public reading of a specific portion of the Torah. The portions of the Torah are read in sequence so that in one year the entire five books have been read. Before it is read, the Torah is taken out of the ark and carried throughout the congregation, allowing the Torah to be symbolically shared with the entire community. As the Torah passes by, those close enough will touch it with their *siddur* or *tallit* as a sign of great regard for its teachings.

The Torah is written in Hebrew on parchment. The script contains no vowels or musical notation. A turkey- or goose-quill pen is used with a vegetable dye ink for inscribing the Torah. If any mistakes are made or if any of the text is damaged, the entire Torah is rendered unfit and cannot be used. Therefore every Torah is identical to the next. Traditionally, Torah scrolls are written with three columns to every parchment sheet. The scrolls are attached to wooden rollers called an *etz chaim* (tree of life) and tied with a *gartl* (sash). After the Torah is tied, it is covered by a mantle called a *me'el*. Silver finials are placed on top of the rollers, with small silver bells, a reminder of the bells worn on the garments of the high priest long ago. The reader uses a *yad* (a pointed fashioned in the shape of a hand) as a pointer to follow the text.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Service

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah is not a special service. It is a regular *Shabbat* (Sabbath) service that takes place every Saturday in congregations all over the world. The Torah portion being read by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is the same portion being read in all synagogues today. Before reading from the Torah, the family will symbolically pass its religious heritage from generation to generation. The Torah will be passed from parents of, if grandparents are present, from grandparent to parent to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The Torah portion will then be read, first in Hebrew and then translated into English.

Synagogue

The word synagogue comes from the Greek word *synagoga* (a place of gathering). It is in this place that Jews come to worship.

Torah

The Torah, the most precious object in the sanctuary of a synagogue, rests with the *aron ha-kodesh* (holy ark) which is located in a central position on the bimah (stage). Torah is word meaning "instruction" or "direction," and is comprised of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. According to Jewish tradition, these books were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and contain the history of the Jews from Creation to the death of Moses. It is the central teaching of the Jewish people, providing the religious structure and primary ethical precepts of Judaism. The Torah portion is typically read by several readers, including the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Haftarah

The reader for a Shabbat service also reads or chants a portion from the Haftarah. This reading is not from the Torah itself, but usually from the Prophets or other writings. When the Jews were conquered by the Syrian-Greeks, it was forbidden to read the Torah. To get around this injunction, portions from the later biblical writings were selected instead. These sections were coupled with each week's Torah portion and were often linked thematically to them. By the time it was permitted to read from the Torah again, the Jewish community had grown attached to the Haftarah readings, and so retained them.

D'var Torah

The *d'var Torah* is a commentary about some aspect of the readings of the service, relating the readings to the present day world.

Aliyah

An *aliyah* is the act of being called up to the *bima* to give a blessing before each section of the Torah is chanted. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah says the *aliyah* before and after their second reading, signaling their new role in the community.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Bar Mitzvah literally means "son of the commandment." Bat Mitzvah means "daughter of the commandment." According to Jewish Law, boys and girls become *B'nai Mitzvah* (plural) at the age of 13 years (sometimes 12 for girls). From this point on they are held personally responsible for their religious obligations.

Kippah

The *kippah* or *yarmulke* (Yiddish, pronounced YAH-mi-kaw) is a traditional head-covering worn to show respect for God.

Tallis

A *tallis* is a fringed shawl traditionally worn during prayer. The word *tallis* originally meant "cloak" or "gown" and referred to a large rectangular garment that men wore long ago. Jews attach fringes called *tzitzit* that are tied on the four corners of the *tallis* to symbolize God's presence in the four corners of the earth. They also act as visual reminders of the commandments and are knotted in a pattern symbolizing the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) given by God to the Jewish People.

Siddur

The *siddur* is the prayer book used during the Shabbat service. The word *siddur* comes from the Hebrew word for order. This book describes and presents the order of the service.

Kiddush

Kiddush means sanctification and is a prayer recited over a cup of wine on Shabbat and festivals to sanctify the day.

Challah

Challah is a braided egg bread that is a special part of the Shabbat meal. Tradition says that the three interwoven strands may symbolize either God/Torah/the people of Israel or the Kohanim/Levites/Israelites (three ancient ritual classes of Jews).

Beth Am

Beth means house and *Am* means people so all together our temple's name means "House of the People."

Yasher Koach!

Yasher Koach is a phrase that is spoken with enthusiasm after a reading or giving of a d'var Torah. It means

"May you be strengthened" and is used in place of clapping.