

A Visitor's Guide to the Shabbat Morning Service at Congregation Beth El



CONGREGATION BETH EL

Welcome to Beth El

Welcome to the Sabbath (*Shabbat* in Hebrew) morning service at Congregation Beth El. Any person, regardless of religious affiliation, is welcome to attend. We have prepared this booklet to help our guests feel comfortable and to provide information about the *Shabbat* service and our congregation. We hope you find our efforts both helpful and interesting.

Contents

Synagogue Decorum.....	1
The Sanctuary.....	2
The Clergy and Their Roles in the Shabbat Service.....	3
Books.....	3
The Sabbath Service.....	4
Vocabulary of the Service.....	6
Occasionally Asked Questions.....	7
About Beth El.....	8



Synagogue Decorum

Guests who are not familiar with the Jewish worship service may wonder what they should – or should not – do during the service. Following a few simple guidelines will allow the visitor to comfortably be part of the congregation.

Head coverings. Head coverings are not religious objects, but through centuries of practice, they have acquired importance as a sign of respect. In accordance with Jewish tradition, all males, whether Jewish or not, should wear a head covering – a “*kippah*” or “*yarmulke*” – in the sanctuary. You may notice women with head coverings as well. This practice is optional for women.

Prayer shawls. Unlike head coverings, prayer shawls do have religious significance. The shawls have fringes at the corners as a reflection of the biblical commandment that Jews should place fringes on the corners of their garments as reminders to fulfill God’s commandments. (Numbers 15:38; Deuteronomy 22:12.) Those who aren’t Jewish are asked not to wear a prayer shawl because it signifies acceptance of Jewish commandments, and they may be called upon to fulfill a role in the service.

Standing. From time to time during the service, the congregation will rise. Visitors are also asked to stand. Certain prayers are recited silently while standing with each congregant proceeding at his or her own pace and being seated when he or she concludes the prayer. Please feel free to be seated when you observe congregants doing so. There also are occasions when only some congregants – those in mourning or those wishing to offer a prayer for the healing of another – will be asked to stand. You may remain seated when only some congregants stand or join in standing if you feel it is appropriate to your personal situation.

Participation. Participation is welcome. Please feel free to join in the English readings or read the English transliterations of the Hebrew prayers when they appear in the prayer book.

Taking a break. You may notice congregants leaving the sanctuary and then returning to their seats. The *Shabbat* service lasts until approximately noon, and some in attendance may need to step out of the service for one reason or another. If you need a break, please feel free to excuse yourself at a time when you observe congregants entering or leaving the sanctuary.

Please refrain from . . . The Sabbath is a day of rest and worship and is distinguished from other days both by what we do and by what we refrain from doing. Out of respect for Jewish practice, please turn off and put away all electronic devices, do not take photos or record video or sound, avoid handling money, and refrain from writing or drawing while in the synagogue building. Applause during the service is considered inappropriate, so please express your appreciation to the participants in the service in person after the service concludes. If you must make a phone call, please do so outside.

Other questions? Each *Shabbat* service will have at least three ushers. The ushers, identifiable by their usher badges, will be glad to help with any questions you may have.



The Sanctuary

The elevated area at the front of the sanctuary is referred to as the “*bimah*.” The centerpiece of the sanctuary is the Ark, constructed of glass, which holds the *Torah* scrolls and serves as the focus for prayer. Etched on the glass panels of the Ark are biblical quotations referring to the *Torah* and Beth El. Above the Ark is the *Ner Tamid* (perpetual light), recalling the eternal light maintained in the Temple as described in the *Torah* (Exodus 27:20). To the left and right sides of the *bimah* are lecterns. Somewhat lower and directly in front of the Ark is the reading table where the *Torah* scroll is placed for reading.



The tapestries at the front of the sanctuary, designed by congregant Tamar Fishman, are inspired by two episodes from the life of the patriarch Jacob recounted in the book of Genesis. The titles of the tapestries, “Beth El” (on the right) and “Israel” (on the left), reflect their themes.

“Beth El” depicts Jacob’s dream of angels ascending and descending from heaven on a ladder. In the dream, God promises Jacob that he will inherit the land and father a great and numerous people. When Jacob wakes from his dream, he names the place “Beth El,” meaning “House of God” (Genesis 28).

The “Israel” tapestry recalls Jacob’s night spent wrestling with an unknown being. The “man” with whom Jacob had been contending, realizing the dawn is near and he has not yet prevailed, dislocates Jacob’s hip with a mere touch. Jacob still refuses to release the being – now appreciated as something other than a man – unless he receives a blessing. The mysterious wrestler refuses to divulge his own name but asks Jacob’s name. The being then tells Jacob that his name will now be Israel, a word with several possible meanings, but most often construed as “he who strives with God” (Genesis 32).

The Clergy and Their Roles in the Shabbat Service

Beth El has two rabbis and a cantor, or “*hazzan*,” as full-time clergy. Typically, only one rabbi will be on the *bimah*, using the lectern to your left. The rabbi will generally direct the service, lead certain readings, comment on the week’s *Torah* portion, and deliver a sermon. From time to time, the rabbi will announce the page of the prayer book from which the service is proceeding.

The *hazzan*, on the right side of the *bimah* from your perspective, is the congregation’s prayer leader. The *hazzan* will initiate silent prayers, lead prayers chanted by the congregation as a whole, and lead hymns and songs.

Beth El is fortunate to have many congregants capable of leading services. You will see some of them assisting the clergy in today’s service, reading from the *Torah*, reciting blessings, and fulfilling other roles essential to the *Shabbat* service.

Books

The two books used in the Sabbath service are found in the bookrack in front of you. The smaller volume, titled *Siddur Lev Shalem*, is the prayer book used throughout the service. It contains ancient Hebrew liturgy as well as modern Hebrew and English prayers. While it is nearly 500 pages in length, portions are used only on holidays and special occasions and other parts are used on weekdays or for home observances.

The larger red volume, *Etz Hayim*, contains the entire text of the *Torah* (also referred to as the Five Books of Moses), as well as selections from other writings in the Hebrew Bible. A portion of the *Torah* is read each *Shabbat*. The *Torah* is read from start to finish in sequence each year.

In all Hebrew books, pagination is from right to left. The Hebrew text in *Siddur Lev Shalem* and *Etz Hayim* is translated into English, either on the facing page or in a parallel column. Some prayers are transliterated from Hebrew using English letters, enhancing congregational participation. There are also additional commentaries in the margins. *Etz Hayim* also contains extensive English commentary in introductions, footnotes, and short essays. The essays address more than forty diverse topics, such as biblical archaeology, the land of Israel, civil and criminal law in the Bible, and the *Torah* scroll. The essays are at the back of *Etz Hayim* and listed on pages xiii and xiv of the *Etz Hayim* table of contents.



The Sabbath Service

The *Shabbat* service is divided into four segments: preliminary blessings and psalms, the morning service, the *Torah* service, and concluding prayers.

Preliminary Blessings and Psalms

The *Shabbat* service at Beth El begins with the blessings on page 103 of *Siddur Lev Shalem*. A highlight of this first section of the service is the recitation of a portion of the epic poem from the Book of Exodus known as the Song at the Sea (pages 143-144). The Song at the Sea celebrates the Israelites' escape from Pharaoh's army through the miraculous parting of the Sea of Reeds.

The Morning Service

Traditionally, Jewish services are conducted three times each day – morning, afternoon, and evening. On Saturday morning, the morning service (*Shacharit*) is the second major segment of the *Shabbat* service. The morning service begins on page 149 of *Siddur Lev Shalem* with the call to worship. If the page is not announced, you will know that the call to prayer has been issued because the congregation will rise.

The morning service contains the two prayers at the core of every Jewish worship service, the *Shema* and the *Amidah*. The *Shema* begins on page 155 with the well-known declaration of faith translated as “Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” The three paragraphs following this declaration reflect core principles of Jewish faith.

The *Amidah*, beginning on page 159, is the central prayer of all Jewish services. It is sometimes recited communally and at other times recited first silently and then out loud by the *hazzan*. During a silent recitation, each congregant prays at his or her own pace. Some will conclude the prayer and take their seats while others continue standing. You may feel free to sit when you observe other congregants sitting down. During the *hazzan's* recitation, we all remain standing through the end of the section called the *Kedushah* on page 161.



The Torah Service

The *Torah* scroll is the holiest ritual object in Jewish tradition, and the *Torah* service, the most ceremonial portion of the *Shabbat* service, reflects this reverence. The scrolls are adorned with decorative covers and ornamented with silver crowns and shields. The congregation will stand when the doors of the Ark – in which the scrolls are held – are open, when a scroll is carried, or when a scroll is lifted up.

The *Torah* service begins on page 168 of *Siddur Lev Shalem* with the removal of a scroll (sometimes more than one scroll) from the Ark and a procession through the congregation. It is customary, as a sign of reverence, for the congregants to touch the *Torah* cover as it passes with a prayer shawl or prayer book which is then brought to the lips. Congregants also turn to face the *Torah* as it is carried through the sanctuary.

Study is a central and enduring Jewish value, embodied in the *Torah* service by reading and discussing a portion of the *Torah*. Typically, the rabbi or the Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah will introduce the portion being read and discuss its significance before the reading from the scroll begins. The portion being read is divided into sections, and blessings will be recited before and after each reading, or *aliyah*. Congregants or friends and family of a Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah are honored by being called up to recite these blessings. When there is a Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah, he or she will recite the final blessings and read the final section of the *Torah* portion.

When the reading of the *Torah* portion is concluded, the scroll is lifted and held aloft. The cover and adornments are then replaced, and a reading from one of the books of the Prophets immediately follows. This reading, called the *Haftarah*, is selected based upon content that corresponds to the *Torah* portion. If there is a Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah, he or she will chant the *Haftarah*. After a procession through the sanctuary, the *Torah* scroll is then returned to the Ark.

Concluding Prayers

The final portion of the *Shabbat* service, which you may hear referred to as the *Musaf* service, begins on page 185 of *Siddur Lev Shalem*. Following a recitation of the *Amidah*, the young children in the congregation are invited to join the clergy for the singing of *Ein Kelohenu*, page 204, then *Aleinu*, in which the congregation rises in praise and then bows in acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. Following a prayer recited by the mourners in the congregation, the service concludes with the blessings over wine and bread and *Adon Olam*, the traditional closing hymn, on page 211. After the service, all are invited to the *kiddush* luncheon.



Vocabulary of the Service

Aliyah: The honor given to a person called to recite the blessings for the reading of a section of the *Torah* portion. The word translates as “going up.”

Aron hakodesh: Meaning “holy cabinet,” and usually translated as “Ark,” the term refers to the fixture in which the *Torah* scrolls rest when not being used. At Beth El, the Ark is the large glass fixture at the front of the sanctuary centered on the *bimah*.

Bar Mitzvah: “Son of the commandment.” A boy becomes a “*Bar Mitzvah*” and responsible for adult religious obligations at age 13. The term is often used colloquially to refer to the service in which this milestone is recognized.

Bat Mitzvah: “Daughter of the commandment.” A girl becomes a “*Bat Mitzvah*” and responsible for adult religious obligations at age 12, though the ceremonial recognition of this milestone is often deferred to age 13. The term is often used colloquially to refer to the service in which this milestone is recognized.

B'nai Mitzvah: Plural of *Bar Mitzvah* when there are two boys, or a *Bar Mitzvah* and a *Bat Mitzvah* when there is one boy and one girl. The plural of *Bat Mitzvah* is *B'not Mitzvah*.

Bimah: The elevated area at the front of the sanctuary where the Ark holding the *Torah* scrolls is located, where the clergy speak and lead the service, and where the *Torah* is read.

Daven: Yiddish, meaning “pray.”

D'var Torah: A commentary on the *Torah* portion.

Haftarah: The reading from one of the books of the Prophets chanted after the *Torah* reading in the Sabbath service.

Kaddish: The ancient prayer (in Aramaic, the vernacular language spoken in Israel 2,000 years ago) recited in several different forms during the service. The Kaddish serves as a demarcation between elements of the service. A special Kaddish recited only by mourners is also recited during the service.

Kiddush: The blessing over wine recited at the end of the *Shabbat* service. It is also the term used to refer to the light lunch or refreshments usually served following the service.

Kippah: The head covering worn by males (and optionally by females) in the service. It also is referred to by the Yiddish word, “*yarmulke*.”

Mazal tov: In popular usage, the term means “congratulations”.

Musaf: The additional prayers after the *Torah* service which conclude the *Shabbat* morning service.

Shacharit: The morning service preceding the *Torah* service.

Shul: The Yiddish word for synagogue.

Siddur: The prayer book for the service.

Tallit: The prayer shawl worn by Jewish men, and optionally by Jewish women, during the service.

Torah scroll: The Five Books of Moses written by hand on a parchment scroll wrapped around two wooden rods. The text is written in ancient Hebrew by a specially trained scribe using no vowels or punctuation.

Occasionally Asked Questions

Why is so much of the service conducted in Hebrew?

Jewish law stresses the importance of understanding the prayers of the service and permits prayer in any language congregants understand. However, Hebrew is the preferred language of communal Jewish worship. The maintenance of a fairly uniform Hebrew prayer service enables Jews to feel at home in any synagogue anywhere in the world, even in countries where fellow Jews speak another language in everyday life. Hebrew is also the language in which the Bible was written millennia ago and the language in which Jewish worship has been conducted for more than 100 generations. The use of Hebrew thus unifies the Jewish people across space and time and adds meaning to the worship experience.

Do the congregants understand the Hebrew words of the service?

Some congregants understand every word of the Hebrew liturgy, while other congregants have no ability to read Hebrew whatsoever. Many congregants have facility in reading Hebrew and a very good understanding of the meaning of the prayers, even though the intricacies of Hebrew grammar and vocabulary would prevent them from performing a word-for-word translation of most of the prayers. However, all congregants share the sense that the use of Hebrew is meaningful. Even those who cannot read Hebrew, by following the transliterations (English renderings of the phonetic sounds of the Hebrew) in the prayer book and attention to the English translations, develop a deep understanding of the meaning of the prayers.

Why is the service so long?

The *Shabbat* service lasts longer than many other religious services. Apart from theological and traditional reasons for the inclusion of most of the content of the service, the length of the service encourages congregants to disengage from their daily lives and provides time for reflection and spiritual rejuvenation.

Why is almost all of the service sung?

The power of song to intensify the worship experience has made music an integral part of Jewish worship from earliest times. For centuries, nearly all the prayers, blessings, and recitations of the service have been chanted or sung. The use of melody in the chanting of *Torah* and *Haftarah* also serves as a learning tool. Musical notations are assigned to the texts so that the use of the designated melody results in reading the Hebrew with proper punctuation and emphasis. This is particularly helpful in reading the *Torah* scroll, which has no punctuation, vowels, or musical notation.

Why is there no organ or piano?

Historically, Judaism banned instrumental music in services as a sign of mourning following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans nearly 2,000 years ago. While many Jewish congregations now permit the use of musical instruments in services, Beth El is among those congregations that do not use instruments in the *Shabbat* morning service. Many congregants find that the exclusive use of the human voice enriches the worship experience.

About Beth El

Founded by sixteen families in 1951, Congregation Beth El is today home to approximately 1,100 households and a leading contributor to Jewish and community life in Bethesda, Montgomery County, and the Washington, DC area.



Beth El is affiliated with the Conservative movement. As Conservative Jews, we adhere to the essence of our tradition while meeting change with innovation. Our clergy encourage congregants to share their skills, experience, and creativity with the Beth El community. As a result, we have a variety of lay-led Sabbath services in addition to the primary service. Beth El has been consistently ahead of its time regarding full participation and leadership by women in all facets of religious observance and synagogue governance. Education is a primary value at Beth El, manifested in our renowned cooperative preschool, our thriving religious school, and extensive adult education programs.

Additional information is available at the Beth El website, www.bethelmc.org.



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