

**“Ma Nishtana: Tell me what is the Difference?”**

**Defining the Shir Libeynu ethos from our inception to today.**

**An opportunity for us to consider together the basic tenets of  
Congregation Shir Libeynu: our philosophy, theology and approach  
to Jewish worship, ritual and prayer**

Good morning. Thank you for rising so early on a Saturday to ask and hopefully answer this morning’s MA NISHTANA question - **what makes Congregation Shir Libeynu unique amongst the unaffiliated and affiliated congregations in Toronto? Literally, what makes us different?**

Before I open the floor to some questions and comments I would like to speak a little about our shul – our mission statement, our approach to ritual, to prayer and to theology.

At our inception, we presented the following mission statement: **Shir Libeynu is a liberal, egalitarian congregation, unaffiliated with any particular stream of Judaism. Our goals are to joyfully celebrate**

**and experience all aspects of Jewish life and spirituality within an environment of inclusiveness, innovation, and intellectual challenge.**

**We welcome new rituals and liturgy while recognizing and affirming the many paths our tradition offers.**

Although we have certainly grown way beyond our imagination since that day 20 years ago when five Jewish lesbians sat in my living room creating this statement I think that in fact this is still our ethos and raison d'être – the most important reason for our being. Though in many respects the world of liberal Jewry has changed and developed in the past 20 years and although many synagogues in Toronto and in Canada have caught up to us in being inclusive of LGBTQ individuals, I am suggesting here that we continue to be different from them, as well as unique in our approach to Judaism.

The question of course is HOW ARE WE DIFFERENT? I would like to focus this discussion on the following four areas of difference that we have in regards to who we are in our role as a Jewish worship

community. These areas are participation, liturgy or words of prayer, ritual and theology.

**1. WORSHIP SERVICE REGARDING PARTICIPATION:** We are LGBTQ inclusive, egalitarian and participatory. We welcome all people to be a part of our service and have no ritual restrictions on non-Jewish participation in our group aliyot, in being part of our choir and in presenting speeches and *d'var torah*. We allow for shared leadership in *chazzanut* and leading aspects of the services themselves. And finally our Rabbi conducts interfaith weddings within a **JEWISH CONTEXT ONLY**.

**2. WORSHIP SERVICE REGARDING LITURGY OR WORDS OF WORSHIP:** We are one of only two congregations in all of Canada that exclusively uses for Sabbath services siddur (prayer book), *Eit Ratzon*. The siddur has no connection to any of the four denominations and is in many ways focused on liberal, non-affiliated congregations. All prayers in this siddur are translated into non-patriarchal, non-sexist English and all are transliterated. Hebrew prayers wherever possible

include the matriarchs and the patriarchs. Additionally this siddur has a variety of commentary and notes explaining and expanding upon specific prayers and providing a meditative mode for experiencing some prayers. We are purposeful in our choice of readings for each service and for our High Holy Day supplements. The English readings provided in a handout for all services reflect the diversity of Jewish thought as well as secular poetry and prose that connect to the various themes of the services. We are again purposeful in presenting at services a feminist, as well as GLBTQ perspective not only in readings but in many of our *d'var torah* speeches.

Importantly, at Shir Libeynu, the content of our services - be they for the Sabbath or High Holy Days - are a balance between what is called kavanah and keva – between intention and spontaneity and fixity and structure. We understand ourselves as being in what Professor Lawrence Hoffman calls the third stage of creative Jewish prayer making. The first, the classical period of the rabbis, provided what that age needed: limits. It offered interpretations of when, how and in what way the

prayers were to be arranged and recited. It gave structure, keva, the framework and the details of Jewish worship. The second age, he says, was at the beginning of modernism in the 19th century, which gave us a philosophy of Jewish prayer: what was meant and what could be meant by the words of our siddur (Jewish prayer book), an intellectual understanding of the prayers, where they came from, their history, their meaning, context, etc.

We are living today in what Hoffman would say is the third period of creative-prayer making. As he says, there is a specific difficulty in Jewish prayer. There are laws: how to pray, when to pray, what to pray. There are fixed times, fixed ways, fixed texts. Yet, particularly today, we know and want prayer to be the outpouring of the soul, a matter of kavanah (inner devotion).

Jewish prayer is again, as Hoffman notes, guided by two opposite principles: order and outburst, regularity and spontaneity, uniformity and individuality, law and freedom, a duty and a prerogative, empathy and

self-expression, insight and sensitivity, creed and faith, the word and that which is beyond words.

We at Shir Libeynu live within these guiding principles and I think that is most important. We allow for experimentation, for contemplation, and meditation, for chanting and reflection.

In this regard we are planning in the new Jewish year to invite our members to four pre-service “preparation for prayer sessions,” where we explore specific prayers intellectually and experientially to enhance our Shabbat worship experience.

**3. WORSHIP SERVICE REGARDING RITUAL:** At Shir Libeynu we do not force individuals to wear a kippah or a tallit. We do however focus our services often on new rituals and re-visioning of old. We have as noted group aliyot. We find creative ways to enact prayers, such as the placing of the tallit around our neighbour, or the saying of the Priestly Blessing to one another. We encourage members to share with the congregation events in their lives be they celebratory or sorrowful.

In this regard, we incorporate within our services, rituals for all life cycles events of congregants. Our Misheberach themes for aliyot are spontaneous and often non-scripted.

As a contemporary Rabbi noted in talking about the content of [ritualwell.org](http://ritualwell.org), we understand ritual as fundamental to “helping people make meaning of their lives and the broader Jewish experience.” It is an embodied way to sanctify moments in our lives. As such, we try in our services and in the personal rituals our Rabbi creates with members of our congregation to have rituals that reflect these moments for miscarriages, same-sex wedding ceremonies, coming out and recovery from personal or communal crises and trauma.

**4. WORSHIP SERVICE REGARDING THEOLOGY:** Shir Libeynu, because it is unaffiliated, is open to the diversity of Jewish theological positions. We do not affirm a specific “belief” system within our tradition, but rather acknowledge those who are agnostics, or atheists, as well as those whose understanding of the Divine is neo-hassidic and neo- Kabbalistic. Members come from all denominations of Judaism and

reflect many different Jewish theological modalities including feminist, queer and secular humanistic.

**Finally, to use the words of our mission statement, our services reflect the diversity of our tradition. Our community embraces an egalitarian and progressive Judaism where all our words of prayer and meditation, all our ritual symbols and actions are firmly rooted within the abundant panoply of Jewish thought and tradition.**

**Thank you.**