

Mah Nishtana - What Makes Shir Libeynu Different?

A Feature Article on our May Adult-Education Session and Shabbat Service

The word "Israel" means to wrestle, noted Rabbi Aviva Goldberg, as she wrapped up an adult education session she conducted on Saturday, May 7, 2016. We were a small but enthusiastic group that attended and contributed to the discussion, which attempted to get to the heart of what makes our congregation different than others in Toronto and beyond, even so-called progressive and unaffiliated ones, such as ours. Rabbi Goldberg's presentation included historical context and theological perspectives. We all agreed that her closing remarks about wrestling with, or continuing to seek answers to, questions of worship, liturgy, ritual and theology are germane to what makes us distinct and unique.

The participants rose to the occasion with their contributions to the discussion. Like many members, Jamie Flagal appreciates the spontaneity and participation that occur during the rituals on our bimah at our services. Yet, he adds, "we sing prayers that allow us to enter any shul and immediately feel a sense of belonging even if that shul is in a far away land." Jonathan Silin discussed the "envelope of Judaism, something created and defined," and he pondered, "what is (specifically) Jewish about how we should be in the world?" Barbara Center remarked on the "framework, foundation and feeling" of our community. And, as Rabbi Goldberg noted further, "ritual marks the sanctity of a moment, and fuses with theology," a theology that is not fixed at our shul, despite our constant intention to recognize and affirm the many paths our tradition offers.

[Read Rabbi Goldberg's full text of Mah Nishtana: What Makes us Different?](#)

This workshop proved rich and inspiring, and its content a fitting corollary to the Shabbat service that followed, when we memorialized the loved ones of members, including the family of that day's Torah reader, Harvey Worth. We also celebrated various milestones: Those included honours for a couple about to be married, Ed Weiss and Mollie Roskies, and another for the birthday of one of our longest-time members, Gary Klein. (Full disclosure: Gary is this reporter's husband). His long-held atheism does not prevent him from being a good Jew, said Rabbi Goldberg, citing that week's Torah portion, which discusses the concept of kadosh, being holy, with the highest form of it being the way we treat others. Our community recognizes that the practice of kind deeds and helpful action, exemplified by members such as Gary, makes a difference. Hillel conveyed "that this is the whole of Torah, the rest is commentary," said Rabbi Goldberg.

Thank you to Jonathan Silin, our education director, for inspiring the topic of this workshop, one that is "just a beginning," he has assured us. And thank you to Rabbi Goldberg for leading us through it, and for her thought-provoking essay on the matter. (It will remain on our website as well.) [Let us know](#) if you would like to continue the conversation at an upcoming workshop.

-Harriet

Eisenkraft