

## Ma Nishtana: Tell Me What is the Difference?©

By Rabbi Aviva Goldberg, Ph.D

### An explanation of Congregation Shir Libeynu's basic tenets: our philosophy, theology and approach to Jewish worship, ritual and prayer.

Many ask us what makes Congregation Shir Libeynu unique amongst the multitude of unaffiliated and affiliated congregations in Toronto. What makes us different?

It is very difficult to articulate all of what we are and what we hope to be for our congregants.

The following is an attempt to encapsulate our approach to prayer, to ritual, to theology and to participation. Please note, however, that only by coming to our synagogue and being a part of our services can you truly experience who and what we are!

At our inception, we created 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 far beyond our imagination since that day more than two decades ago when five Jewish lesbians sat in one of our living rooms creating this statement, our ethos and *raison d'être* - the most important reasons for our being - remain the same. This is what makes us different. These are the areas that define who we are as a Jewish worship community. To understand Congregation Shir Libeynu it is important to examine our specific attitudes and approach to the following aspects of worship: liturgy or words of prayer, ritual, theology and participation.

## 1. CONGREGATION SHIR LIBEYNU'S APPROACH TO LITURGY OR WORDS OF

**WORSHIP:** It is crucial to our understanding of Jewish worship to have the content of our services be a balance between what is called *kavanah* and *keva* – intention and spontaneity. We understand ourselves as being, to use the words of contemporary scholar of Jewish prayer, Dr. Lawrence Hoffman, in the “third stage of creative Jewish prayer making.” The first was the classical period of the rabbis, providing what that age needed: limits. It offered interpretations of when, how and in what ways the prayers were to be arranged and recited. It gave *keva*, the framework, structure and details of Jewish worship.

The second stage was at the beginning of modernism in the 19th century. It gave us a philosophy of Jewish prayer: what was meant and what could be meant by the words of our siddur. It focused on an intellectual understanding of the prayers, their history, their meaning, context, and so forth.

Today we are living in what Hoffman would say is the third period of creative-prayer making. Though there are laws on how to pray, when to pray, what to pray and fixed times, fixed ways, fixed texts, our concerns are different. Our focus is to have prayer also be the outpouring of the soul, a matter of *kavanah* (inner devotion).

Hoffman has stated that Jewish worship is 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. We allow for experimentation, for contemplation, and meditation, for chanting and reflection. We intellectually and experientially explore during many of services specific prayers to enhance our Shabbat worship experience.

We follow the very accessible siddur or prayer book for our Sabbath services. This siddur, *Eit Ratzon*, reflects several aspects of our philosophy. It has no formal or informal connection to the four denominations of contemporary Judaism. All prayers have been translated into non-patriarchal, non-sexist English. All prayers are transliterated, making the Hebrew accessible to all. Wherever possible, the prayers include the matriarchs and the patriarchs. As well, *Eit Ratzon* provides a variety of commentary and notes, which explain and expand upon specific prayers and often give the worshipper a meditative, contemplative mode for experiencing these prayers.

As a worship congregation we are purposeful in our choice of English supplemental readings for all of our services. On the Sabbath, prayers are augmented by English readings provided in handouts specific to the theme of the particular service. These readings reflect a diversity of Jewish thought and represent new liturgies as well as secular poetry and prose that connect to the various topics of the respective services. In this regard we are cognizant of feminist and GBLTQ perspectives which we try to include in both readings and discussion. Similarly on the High Holy Days, there are supplemental booklets of readings which are changed and edited annually. As on the Sabbath, these readings are integral to the services, and participants volunteer to read these to the congregation.

**2. CONGREGATION SHIR LIBEYNU'S APPROACH TO RITUAL:** At Shir Libeynu we focus on creating new rituals and re-visioning old. We have for example group *aliyot*; the themes of which are spontaneous and often non-scripted. 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. We incorporate within our services rituals for all the life cycles events of our congregants.

In short, we understand ritual (as noted in the website [ritualwell.org](http://ritualwell.org)) 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 existence. As such, we try in our services to create, often with members’ input, rituals that reflect significant moments in our lives such as birth, miscarriage, coming out, recovery from individual or communal crises and trauma and personal celebrations.

**3. CONGREGATION SHIR LIBEYNU’S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY:** Congregation Shir Libeynu, because it is unaffiliated, is open to the diversity and variety of Jewish theological positions that have developed throughout Jewish history. We do not affirm a specific belief system within our tradition, nor do we attest to the tenets of a particular denomination. Rather we acknowledge the perspectives of all individuals who attend our synagogue be they agnostic or atheist, traditional or liberal, neo-hassidic or neo-Kabbalistic, secular or observant. Our members come from all denominations of Judaism and reflect the many different Jewish theological modalities including feminist, queer and secular humanistic; modalities we try to incorporate within our conversations and discussions.

**4. CONGREGATION SHIR LIBEYNU’S APPROACH TO PARTICIPATION:** As an LGBTQ inclusive, egalitarian and participatory congregation, we welcome everyone to be a part of our service. There are no ritual restrictions on GBLTQ individuals, or on non-Jewish individual. We welcome all to participate in our rituals, in presenting relevant speeches and workshops. In fact, we urge our members to share in *chazzanut*, Torah and *Haftorah* chanting and in contributing to all aspects of the services. We are a reflexive community and welcome suggestions for improving what we can do for our community and critique of what we are doing.

Last but certainly not least, our community embraces an egalitarian and progressive Judaism where all our words of prayer and meditation, all our ritual symbols and actions, and all our theologies are firmly rooted within the abundant panoply of Jewish thought and tradition.

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