

Personal Reminiscences of Women's Shabbat

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Last year, after we celebrated our 31st annual Women's Shabbat, several women asked me to talk about the long history of this event. So today I'm taking a few minutes to share with you some memories and thoughts of an event that has become an integral part of this shul.

Women's Shabbat and I have been nearly inseparable over the years, so bear with me as I share some personal reminiscences.

32 years ago, I approached Rabbi Hahn with an idea I'd been mulling around. I wanted to see a Shabbat service at which all the participants would be women. An all-women service just seemed like a natural thing to me. In retrospect, it was, after all, the 70's, the age of Women's Lib. But it just seemed right to me. I'd only been a member of GJC a few years, and Rabbi Hahn had been here even less time than I, but he agreed it was a good idea, gave me his unqualified support, and Women's Shabbat was off and running.

That very first Women's Shabbat happened to be the same date as one of the early Mt. Airy Day celebrations, and I had agreed to organize a bake sale for that event. I remember standing in my kitchen evening after evening, using the counter as a work space. I had a GJC membership list on the left, a Mt. Airy membership list on the right, and a telephone on the other side of the room with an 8-foot cord. I made phone call after phone call, night after night... One call for Women's Shabbat, one call for Mt. Airy Day. Sometimes I got lucky and found a GJC member who was a Mt. Airy resident who would both participate and bake a cake for me! Do any of you remember Betty Warshaw? She was one of those women who came through for both.

Back then, we — the women of this congregation — did not have the wide variety of synagogue skills we have today. There were women who had never had an aliyah; some may have shared an aliyah with a husband, but were not comfortable doing it alone. Most had never held nor carried a Torah and marched around the shul during the Torah service. I don't know whether any of us had ever done Hagbah ... lifting the Torah before it is dressed and returned to the ark. Anybody remember Gabriella Fellner? Gabi was the first brave soul to agree to do this for Women's Shabbat, and she did it for us faithfully, with pride and skill for a number of years.

Also back some 30 years ago, there were very few women who could read Torah. But there were a few: Miriam Gafni stands out in my mind. But there were not many; and so for the first several years we had to rely on our post Bat Mitzvah girls to read for us.

The idea of a Woman's Shabbat was new, and it was hard getting people to participate. I didn't keep a list of participants that first year, but I think we were 20 or 25 women and girls. I remember that I had to daven both Shacharit and Hallel myself because there were few others who could, and I needed them to read Torah.

Those first 10 years or so I felt a burden of having to daven or leyn or be gabbai or all three for Women's Shabbat. I was glad to do it, but I worried for our ability to sustain this event if one person was playing so large a role. But the women of this congregation have challenged themselves; they have seized many opportunities to learn new synagogue skills and to stand up and be counted as participating women in the Shabbat service.

Today my list of women who will daven, read Torah or recite a Haftarah is a nice healthy list, and growing. The list of women who are not afraid to lift a Torah, or carry it around the sanctuary is also growing every year, and the number of women eager to participate in an

aliyah or an ark opening is so big that there are more names than I can ever include. Every year I have to leave out some women. Please understand this is not personal.

(By the way, the role of Hagbah is one of the hardest to fill for Women's Shabbat, so if you're interested, please let me know!)

Several years ago I had the most wonderful realization concerning Women's Shabbat: I realized that we have so many talented women in this congregation now that I don't need "me" anymore to leyn or daven. From a selfish point of view, it feels terrific to be able to sit back and enjoy all of you making this service what it is, what it's grown to be. It's wonderful knowing that this can happen without me, though I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world.

As I was reviewing old programs while putting these thoughts together, I did a rough estimate of the number of women who've participated over the years: more than 350 women. I know I'm missing some names, and I know this does not necessarily include the young girls who've participated also. As I looked at the list I saw names of very some special women who have moved away, or left the Centre or who have passed away. Names that evoke many memories: Some were women who gave years of service to this shul and are still missed.

Initially, when we had more Bar and Bat Mitzvahs in the congregation, the only Shabbat we could reserve was Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach. That meant two Torahs, two women to lift the Torah, two to wrap it, four women to carry the Torahs around the shul, and the addition of the Hallel service. And, of course, having Women's Shabbat during Pesach also meant a kosher l'pesach Kiddush! Not an easy task! I remember that Bea Riseman organized this for us for several years.

One lovely memory I have from early services was the abbreviated version of Psukei D'Zimrah we used to do. I have a vivid memory of sisters Rita Malmud and Betty Koffler standing side by side, up here at this table, alternately reading the brachot. Betty would recite one bracha and Rita would say Amen and recite the next. Then Betty would respond amen and read the next, and so on. It was so lovely to see them up here together.

Over the years we've included mothers and daughters together, sisters, sisters-in-law, cousins, friends, colleagues. We've even had three generations of women from the same family here together. One comes to mind immediately, but I'm sure there were others. I remember seeing Mildred Magil, her daughter Ronnie, and Ronnie's daughter Wendy. And now, though Wendy has moved too far away to belong to GJC, she has daughters of her own to carry on.

There have been other lovely moments. Several times we've used Women's Shabbat to honor special women for their dedication and contributions to GJC. One year we honored Cele Marrits, whom we all miss this year. Speaking of Cele, one year I asked Cele to do the Haftorah, and asked her again a couple of years later, and then somehow it became "hers." Cele did the Haftorah for many years, even after her voice had gone, until she could no longer do it. She always loved to repeat the last few verses in English, sung in trop. And over all those years, I would never have asked Cele not to do it. It was part of the tradition.

I remember honoring Linda Hahn during her last year as our rebbetzin. We honored Debby Sclan for her marvelous work on the Torah scroll covers. One of the loveliest honoring Shabbatot we had was the year we honored three of our "older" angels: Bess Schick, Gittel Labovitz and Bertha Pepp.

Throughout all these years, the Women's Club has generously sponsored Women's Shabbat, bringing in speakers, sponsoring Kiddush or luncheon, helping with organization, mailings, publicity. But this is not Women's Club Shabbat. It was never meant to be. This service, this event belongs to any woman in the synagogue who wants to participate. I have tried throughout the years to make sure to include women from the Charry sanctuary, Minyan Masorti and Dorshei Derech. We try to include new members, long-time members, representatives of the various committees and the office staff ... and I think that if you look around this room, you'll see that same representation in our attendance today.

I think most of you know where I come from. I grew up in Mt. Vernon, New York, as the daughter of a conservative rabbi who was fairly well known in the conservative movement. My father advocated aliyot for women back in the 1950's. He wrote the first paper for the law committee of the Rabbinical Assembly recommending that women be given aliyot in conservative congregations. In those days, his colleagues thought he was a radical. Actually, they thought he was nuts, but it's never respectful to refer to your father as "nuts." Given this background, it is no wonder that Women's Shabbat has been so much a part of my life here at GJC.

My father attended Women's Shabbat a few times when he was visiting me, and he always enjoyed the service. I think he felt, in some small way, responsible. I was immensely touched when during the first year after his death I was informed by Women's Club that Women's Shabbat that year would be dedicated to his memory. That year Rabbi Hahn spoke lovingly of my father's legacy, and every year when we gather here to celebrate Women's Shabbat, I imagine him smiling down at us, kvelling, as if we were all his daughters.

Over the years, we've been rained on, and snowed on, and we've enjoyed the hint of spring in the air. We've handled not having enough participants and having too many. The honors ladies in the back — Marcy has been helping me out with this for a number of years — fill in the last-minute gaps, provide substitutes for the people who arrive too late for their part, while then fitting the latecomers in somewhere later in the service. We've handled the No Shows, the little tussles and gaffes.

Thirty some years ago I would never have dreamed that we'd still be celebrating Women's Shabbat today. I don't know what I expected, if anything. I didn't think that far ahead. We did one, then another, and then another, and now there are 32 of them. As I said, over the years, more and more women have learned synagogue skills, and more and more women look forward to participating or being here. We truly celebrate this event, the best meaning of the word "celebrate." Part of its magic, I have always thought, is that we appreciate being here. Because women did not always have the right to be here, to do these tasks and receive these honors, we take our participation in Women's Shabbat seriously and treat ourselves and the service with dignity and honor.

As I have learned that I am no longer "needed" to daven or leyn, so too I have realized that Women's Shabbat will get organized and will continue when I'm too old to take part ... in say 50 or 60 years. Ladies, women, it has been a pleasure doing this all these years. I am so proud of us all. May we, our daughters, their daughters, the women of this congregation today and in the future continue to celebrate Women's Shabbat for many years to come.