Administering Spirituality

Through the Lens of Shabbat

Thesis for Fellow in Temple Administration
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As a rookie synagogue executive director at a small Reform congregation in downtown Chicago, I found real comfort and real meaning in my Friday afternoon Shabbat ritual.

Our temple was small both in terms of members and physical space. Located on the ninth floor of a downtown shopping center, our temple was wholly comprised of a lobby, a reception area, a kitchen, a sanctuary, three offices and a conference room. My office had a beautiful view of the skyscraper next door as well as Lake Michigan to the east. As our space was rented, it was cleaned each night by the building cleaning service, and therefore, we had no maintenance personnel of our own on our staff.

With a membership of just over 200 households, we found we were able to serve the needs of our congregation with a full time staff of only a rabbi, a cantorial soloist, a receptionist and a young, inexperienced executive director.

Our office closed on Fridays at 2:00 p.m. The rabbi went home to finish his sermon and enjoy Shabbat dinner with his family. The cantorial soloist usually came down from her home in the suburbs in time to meet me for a quick Shabbat dinner before services, and I found myself left alone in the temple for three hours as the week ended, and as Shabbat began.

Since no one was in the office, I would usually turn music on loud enough so I could hear it throughout the entire temple. It was not Jewish music, just music I happened to be enjoying at the time. I turned off the lights in the lobby and hung a sign on our door indicating what time Shabbat services began that evening. The temple was closed, the front door was locked, and I was left to prepare for Shabbat.

I walked through our space to ensure that the garbage cans were empty, and that the carpet was clean. I checked that all the light bulbs worked properly, and had even been given a broom stick with a suction cup attached at the end to change any that had burned out.

I made sure all of our kippot and tallit were neatly put out for people to use, and I carefully laid out our Shabbat flyer for the night. I was sure to put the Shabbat flyer exactly where I had been told to, in the same exact spot it had been put out for years before I became the Executive Director. Challah was cut, wine was poured, and we were ready to welcome our members and guests for another lovely Shabbat at our little congregation.

Once my Shabbat preparations were finished, I could then lock the door to the temple and brave the busy bustling Chicago streets to meet the cantorial soloist for a Shabbat dinner at a nearby restaurant. We both acknowledged that if we could not be with family, it was nice to at least enjoy Shabbat dinner with a good friend.

Although the only door to temple was always locked when I left for dinner, and locked when I returned, we were always sure to find Abe sitting in a chair in the lobby of the temple, patiently waiting for Shabbat services to begin. Abe, of blessed memory, was a long time member of the temple. He was a member long before I worked there, long before the cantorial soloist worked there, and long before the rabbi worked there. He used to keep the Torah at his home back in the days when the
temple was without a building. Wherever the temple members happened to meet on any given Shabbat, Abe was sure to be there with Torah in hand. We surmised that he was able to find a building security person to let him through the locked doors, but we never asked. After all, he was Abe! Stoic and quiet...deserving of a little special treatment, and a lot of respect.

Once inside, the door was (officially) unlocked, lights were turned on, and our members were welcomed for another Shabbat of warmth and joy. I enjoyed greeting our congregants, talking to them about their week, and their plans for the weekend ahead. I would learn of new grandchildren, I would hear about health concerns raised during recent doctor visits, and I would always get a kiss on the cheek from Angela, of blessed memory, a Holocaust survivor who was so very happy to be able to spend Shabbat in the familiar surroundings of her temple, a temple which gave her so much pride and joy.

I am now the Executive Director of a much larger 975 household congregation, but I often reflect on those days, early in my career at Congregation Kol Ami, with fondness and warmth. I now realize that as I was learning how to be the administrator of a holy community, I was also learning how to administer spirituality itself.

While Shabbat services certainly would have happened each week without me there, I did feel a very real connection to the worship experience through the preparations I made during my Friday afternoon ritual. As the evening went on, while our clergy led worship, I did my part to make sure all else ran smoothly through the entire evening. Temperatures were controlled (and no, I never could make everyone happy) and food for our Oneg Shabbat after worship was prepared. I ensured that everyone who entered the temple was greeted and welcomed, and I responded to any security concerns that may have arisen.

These experiences though were not unique. Friday Night Shabbat observance is something that all synagogue executive directors and administrators deal with on a weekly basis. We regularly struggle with details of worship preparation, volunteer participation, pamphlet editing and publication, member and guest welcoming and engagement, and facility management and staff administration. Along the way, many executive directors also strive to find opportunities, if for only a few precious moments, for their own spirituality. In other words, it is almost as if we deal with the entirety of our job in the span of just a few hours every Friday evening.

However, no two executive directors or administrators, no two synagogues, are exactly the same. Executive directors and administrators deal with a wide variety of issues in the context of the history and traditions of our religion and of our own individual congregations. We must be mindful of how our clergy prefers to lead worship, the manner in which our board and membership choose to be involved in the management of Shabbat, expectations and job descriptions of senior and support staff, and how best to serve the diverse needs of our congregants.

Through my Fellow in Temple Administration thesis, I will provide a “best practices” guide on how synagogue executive directors and administrators can best support the Shabbat experience of their congregations. Yes, there are many other wonderful and deeply meaningful Jewish holidays throughout the year, but Shabbat is the holiday that occurs with the most frequency, and it is within the scope of Shabbat that our congregations present their widest array of approaches to creative worship, engaging programming and fostering community.
Shabbat begins when the sun sets on Friday evening, and concludes with Havdalah services on Saturday evening. In the interim, congregations are host to a myriad of activities throughout the entire Shabbat holiday. From Torah study to Saturday morning Minyan. From single, double and sometimes triple B’nei Mitzvot on both Saturday morning and afternoon to study sessions over a Shabbat luncheon. If the building is open, there is usually a lot happening at every temple on Shabbat.

Especially in Reform congregations, the Saturday morning Torah study and Shabbat minyan is normally attended by a small population of “regulars.” B’nei Mitzvot are attended by family and friends, but usually not the congregation at large. School programs are usually not held on Saturdays, and any special guests or Scholars in Residence are sure to present their primary program on Friday night, when the large crowds are in attendance for Friday night worship.

Shabbat as a whole, from Friday through Saturday, requires strong administrative support, but special and unique attention is usually given to Friday night worship and its associated activities. As such, this thesis will concentrate solely on the Friday night Shabbat experience.

Research for this paper consisted not only of reading the text material cited in the footnotes and bibliography, but it also included several Friday evening site visits to local congregations. I am very fortunate to live and work in the Chicago area, an area with many congregations of many different sizes of various denominations. During my research, I visited four congregations of different sizes to personally experience how other congregations manage the issues synagogue communities and executive directors navigate week to week.

So that meaningful comparisons between temples and practices could be made, I chose to only visit Reform congregations. While all congregations from the wide variety of different Jewish movements certainly do wonderful things all throughout Shabbat, I found enough differences between practices and traditions that I decided to focus solely on Reform temples.

Additionally, through the National Association for Temple Administration email listserv, I conducted an online survey. With over 100 responses from colleagues working at congregations of all different sizes throughout the United States, I was given fascinating insight into how the many different aspects of Shabbat worship and programming is managed from many different perspectives.
“Each generation of Reform Jews has arrived at its own conception or conceptions of the nature of Shabbat and of its meaning in our lives.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote “The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to the holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

One of the great Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was able to clearly and beautifully provide the deeper meaning of the Sabbath observance, and how it may become a part of our lives from week to week, month to month, year to year. However, in order to gain a basic understanding of Shabbat, we must begin where Heschel begins, and that is in Torah Parshat Yitro, when Moses delivers the 10 Commandments to the Jewish people, as given to him by God on Mount Sinai.

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Eternal your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days the Eternal made heaven and earth and sea—and all that is in them—and then rested on the seventh day; therefore the Eternal blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

Exodus 20:8 - 11

Many of the other nine commandments offer a commandment along with an explanation of, or reason why the commandment was written. For instance, the sixth commandment, Exodus 20:12 reads “Honor your father and mother, that you may long endure on the land that the Eternal your God is assigning to you.” We are first told what the commandment is, and then we are told why that commandment should be observed.

However, if God is telling the Jewish people to do something or not to do something through the deliverance of a commandment, the Jewish people are not going to ask for an explanation, a reason, or to be told what will happen if they don’t observe the commandment. If God gives a commandment, it is reasonable to expect that the commandment will be observed.

While no further explanation is given, or is necessary for the seventh commandment which tells us not to murder, God does provide us with explanations for many of the other commandments.

However, the explanation and reasoning for the Shabbat commandment, the fourth commandment, provides both detail and room for questions and interpretation. In fact, for thousands of years, Jewish
people have found ways to observe this commandment in a wide variety of ways.

In traditional and Orthodox communities, the commandment is observed in a very detailed manner while incorporating generations of additional teachings and commentary on the commandment as well. The commandment “you shall not do any work” is strictly observed, but also many other changes are made in the household as a way to observe Shabbat. As a result, Shabbat becomes a time that is clearly separated from the rest of the week.

From the time Shabbat begins on Friday at sundown, electricity is not used, cars are not driven and walks are taken outside only to and from synagogue. Shabbat in the traditional or Orthodox Jewish home is at times filled with a beautiful silence or loud, boisterous music and prayer. Food, prepared before Shabbat has begun is enjoyed, the Torah portion for the week is studied and argued, and time is spent with family and friends relaxing, studying and enjoying this holy celebration of time and space.

In his book, Jewish Literacy, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin explains that observance of the fourth commandment suffers from some misunderstanding. “The sole biblical concern expressed about the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments is that we make the day holy, and refrain from labor. Nonetheless, you’ll be hard put to find people who will not tell you that the major goal of the Sabbath is to rest.”

While some in the Reform community have maintained these traditions and observances, Shabbat is usually observed with much more liberal interpretations. Rarely do we find Reform Jews observing Shabbat to the extent that electricity is not used and cars are not driven. Reform Jews are usually comfortable working and driving on Shabbat, and thankfully for the leaders of our congregations, many Reform Jews also enjoy a visit to their temple on Friday night or Saturday morning as well.

It is through these liberal interpretations of Shabbat, and through outreach such as the Shabbat initiative introduced at the 2007 URJ Biennial that the Union for Reform Judaism has been able to encourage a Shabbat observance that provides for more freedom and more creativity in the enjoyment of our weekly Shabbat ritual. For some, Shabbat may simply mean that the radio is not played when driving in the car. For others, Shabbat may mean participating in Saturday morning worship at temple followed by a family luncheon. For others, Shabbat means a little time reading on the couch in the afternoon, or a brief Havadalah service which observes the end of Shabbat and wishes everyone a good and happy week.

For many Reform Jews, those who belong to and are involved at their synagogues, the place for their Jewish observance and celebration is in fact the temple, sometimes more so than their home. As a result, Reform synagogues utilize Friday night not only for Shabbat worship, but also as a time to present other programs as well. These programs may include religious school student participation, a sermon from a visiting scholar in residence, or a concert from a Jewish musical performer, just to name a few.

Additionally, many people attend Friday night Shabbat so they may observe a Yartzheit (the anniversary of the death of a loved one), to prepare for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, to say a prayer for a friend or relative who is ill, or to watch their child participate in leading Shabbat as part of a Hebrew or
religious school class. Sometimes, our congregants just want to enjoy a relaxing and warm Shabbat evening in the company of their Jewish community, a familiar and comfortable evening in their Jewish home.

Apart from the High Holy Days and religious and Hebrew school attendance, Friday night Shabbat is the time when Reform synagogues often see their largest attendance on a regular basis. As such, there is a significant amount of planning and work that goes into preparing for Friday night Shabbat every week.

From planning the worship details to ensuring there is enough food for everyone to enjoy at the Oneg Shabbat (the traditional time for community during which a light dessert is traditionally enjoyed after the service) to making sure that there are enough volunteers to help manage the evenings activities, there are many details to prepare. In the introduction for her father’s book *The Sabbath*, Susannah Heschel writes, “Preparation for a holy day, my father often said, was as important as the day itself.”

For synagogue staff, the planning and administration of Shabbat can often take several hours through many different meetings, phone calls and emails every week. Whether the Shabbat being planned is a quiet early service at which a small group of congregants is expected to attend, or if hundreds of congregants and guests are expected to attend to hear a nationally recognized Jewish scholar or musical artist, the amount of time, work and effort spent by the synagogue staff to ensure that everything runs smoothly is significant.

It is through these preparations that the synagogue staff, from Rabbis to administrators to program directors to maintenance staff, not only ensures that they are prepared for the evening and its festivities, but that they often also find the deeper meaning in the work they are doing.
As I began work on my thesis, I contacted four area congregations and asked my colleagues if I could visit their congregation in researching my FTA. I made the point that I did not expect, nor would I welcome, any special treatment. I very much looked forward to being a worshipper in their community, and I did not need any special accommodations.

The first congregation I visited was Congregation Beth Emet, a 730 household synagogue in Evanston, Illinois where Bekki Harris-Kaplan is the Executive Director. Approaching the temple for my first research visit, I made mental notes for myself of things that I wanted to be sure to notice. Was I welcomed? Was it clear where to go and what to do once I entered the building? Where would I hang my coat? Could I find the bathroom by myself? Would there be security?

I found a space in the parking lot, and having been to this congregation before, I knew there was more than one entrance, but I was not sure which one to use. Although it was a dark and cold January Chicago evening, the sidewalk was well lit, and following the few people walking in, I had a pretty good sense of where to go.

As I approached the front door through which I had just seen other people enter the building, I grabbed the door handle, and opened it for the elderly couple walking behind me. Not recognizing me, they smiled at me, welcomed me, and asked me directly, “Are you a guest...or a spy?” I looked at them, in complete disbelief that I was asked such a question upon entering my very first temple for my research project. With a smile on my face, I responded, “Well, I guess I’m a little bit of both!” We enjoyed a good laugh and walked inside where we shook off the cold. I took off my gloves and introduced myself and why I was there, and was warmly welcomed to their congregation.

Many congregations pride themselves on being “warm and welcoming”, and they use these exact words to describe the nature of their community and how they treat members and guests. But all too often, too much reliance is put on these words alone, and not enough thought or work is put into training staff and lay leaders on how to welcome the stranger. How does the building look? Is signage effective? Can a person who has never been to your building before easily find where they need to go, gain an impression of the customs, the minhag, of your congregation and worship practices, and will...
the guest want to return, and possibly formally join your community as a member? Our synagogues need to move beyond “warm and welcoming” and explore the deeper, often intangible reasons people feel comfortable, engaged and connected.

Welcoming often begins with a first impression. That first impression may be in the way a secretary answers the phone when calling a congregation, it may be in the signage on the street making visitors aware of where the congregation is, it may be in how well lit the parking lot is and how comfortable people feel from the time they leave the car to the time they walk in the front door of the building. It may be in how you are greeted when walking through the door of a congregation, or in the very worst case, not greeted at all. Whatever that first impression is, it is likely to be permanent in nature, and dictate how a member or guest feels about a congregation for a long time.

In welcoming congregants to our buildings, attention needs to be paid to ensuring that people know where to park and where to enter. Is signage clear? If the climate dictates, has snow been cleared to make for safe driving and walking? Is the lot free of natural and manmade debris? Has every effort been made to ensure that, as one approaches your synagogue, they are directed to your front door with clarity and ease? Are the walkways well lit? Do people have a place to deposit garbage before they walk in the front door? Every detail of that first impression needs to be positive and inviting.

Needless to say, avoiding accusations that your guests are spies is always preferable, but since we can’t always control what our congregants do or say, we must concentrate on those tangible items that we as synagogue executive directors and administrators can control.

In the Chicago area, many congregations are old enough that they have either been re-built, or major structural additions or revisions have been made. Parking lots are added to, and pathways are re-designed to accommodate for easy access to the front door.

None of the four congregations I visited had a single front door. Due to additions and changes in how the buildings are used, each congregation had at least two entry ways that could be used. Those who belong to these congregations, or at least who have visited these congregations before know which door to use. However, at some point during my walk up to each of the four congregations I visited, I found myself asking, “Which door should I use?”

I visited KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation on the south side of Chicago, a 400 household congregation where Tal Rosen is the Executive Director. Not only is KAM (as it is informally known) near the University of Chicago, but it is also directly across the street from President Barack Obama’s house. As such, their accessibility and parking issues are quite unique.

KAM is a 160 year old congregation, and when the current building was first built in the early 1900’s, the main door led right into a beautiful basilica style sanctuary. As the congregation grew, a school and administrative wing was added, and a new main door was added to accommodate this new traffic flow. In time, a smaller sanctuary was built, and the original front door of the congregation is now used only for special occasions when services or larger programs are held in the larger, older sanctuary. The door to the new school and administration wing is on the north side of the building, but the door leading to the old sanctuary is on the west side of the building, facing the President’s house.
Approaching the temple for my visit, I found that certain streets are permanently blocked off and there is only one road that can be used to access the parking lot. Once in the parking lot, my family and I began to walk towards what seemed to be the main door of the temple, the door that leads into the original sanctuary, whereupon a member of the United States Secret Service quickly approached us, and asked us if he could help us. We told him we were visiting for Shabbat services, and he very kindly directed us to the appropriate door, the door that leads into the administrative and school wing. He made it very clear that we were heading not only in the wrong direction, but that going further in that direction would not be in accordance with their security procedures.

Upon finally entering the building, through the correct door, Tal was there to welcome everyone who walked in the door. He wished us a Shabbat Shalom, handed us our prayer books, asked my soon to be Bat Mitzvah daughter Sophie if she would like a Torah commentary book, and personally showed us to our seats.

Having a temple in an area that requires such a high level of security poses certain challenges to be sure, however, as a guest, I actually found the entire experience very comfortable and reassuring. As we approached the temple in our car and on foot, we benefitted from this extra security in that there was never a question as to where we should go. We felt comfortable and safe the entire time. Very safe.

Tal reports that the members of his congregation have gotten used to this extra level of security. Tal told me, “The Secret Service is very flexible with KAM for special events with minimal interference. Even when the President is back in town, they work with the membership to make it as easy as possible.” While this situation is certainly unique, it does illustrate that a community can find a way to be warm and welcoming, even when there are armed guards in bullet proof vests surrounding your building.

Many congregations throughout the Reform movement are in metropolitan areas, and though they do not require the involvement of the United States Secret Service, having uniform security on staff has proven to be a necessary step in response to heightened security and safety concerns. In responding to my survey, 37 congregations indicated that they have security at their buildings on a regular basis.

Most of the congregations who have security regularly do so because they are in a metropolitan area, and security is an absolute necessity. Many other congregations implemented new security procedures and requirements as a result of the 9/11 attacks. Either way, congregational leaders have found that having a security person on site assures their members and guests that they are in a safe place.

When visiting Beth Emet, one of the first things I noticed upon entering was the security person sitting behind a desk in the lobby. As Bekki and lay leaders warmly welcomed every person who walked in the door, many people wished the security guard “Shabbat Shalom”, too. Bekki reports that it was a priority of Beth Emet leadership that their security person was a “consistent presence” whom everyone would know. His name is Butch, and in addition to security, he handles landscaping and supervisory responsibilities as well, all of which is paid for out of the operating budget.

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When providing security, cost is always a concern. In an effort to be transparent with members, and so members appreciate the importance of maintaining a safe space for their congregation, many survey respondents indicated that their security staff is paid for through a special assessment to their members. These assessments run as low as $20 per household per year to as high as $400 per household per year. Other congregations have found it best to absorb this cost into operating budgets, and depending on congregation size, those costs can rise to $100,000 or more per year.

Sydney Baer, Executive Director of Congregation Beth Israel, an 800 household congregation in Portland, Oregon concedes that having security at her building can be a mixed blessing. Sydney says, “It can be alarming for some, but our regulars are accustomed to security for special services.” Alternatively, Marcia Botkin, Executive Director of Temple Judea, a 700 household congregation in Coral Gables, Florida reports that “(our congregants) are very comfortable with (security) and notice when the police are not there.”

There are no clear cut guidelines for when a congregation should provide regular security on a Friday night. For some, seeing a uniformed guard represents a comforting level of safety; for others it is intrusive and an unwelcome reminder of the often dangerous world outside the synagogue walls. Only through experience, or by being attuned to the concerns and wishes of members through the lens of the general crime threat level of a synagogue’s surroundings can a congregation determine for itself when security is necessary. While security personnel can play an important part in making people feel comfortable, it cannot be solely up to security personnel to make people feel welcome.

Although each congregation I visited was different in architecture, layout and surroundings, I found myself feeling the same way upon walking in the front door. A greeter would smile at me, show me where to hang my coat, hand me a prayer book, and welcome me to their congregation. The stress of the day would melt away. My worries about finding the congregation and getting there right on time (not too early, not too late) would melt away, and in a very real and palpable way, I felt at home.

The importance of this initial welcome, and doing whatever we as synagogue leadership can do to make people feel welcome as soon as they enter our property, and then our building cannot be overstated. As Dr. Ron Wolfson writes in the *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, “The synagogue itself – especially its spiritual and lay leadership – will need to accept the challenge of welcoming all who come within its orbit and become a synagogue of relationships.”

Wolfson is stressing that our congregations are based on relationships, and those relationships can, and should, begin immediately upon entering the synagogue. We need to welcome “all who come” so that we can create a sense of holy community so necessary to sustaining a vibrant congregation.

However, it is one thing to simply welcome someone, and it is quite another thing to provide strong administrative procedures to ensure that someone is there with a smile and a prayer book week in and week out, and that is where the challenge for many temples lies. In some temples, the *minhag* is such that a member of the congregation is always sure to be at the front door every Friday night welcoming people as they arrive for worship. In researching for this paper though, I have found that to be the exception, rather than the rule.

The second temple I visited for my research was Congregation Am Shalom, a 950 household congregation in Glencoe, Illinois where Ed Alpert is the Executive Director. Upon walking in the front
door, the very first person I saw was Ed. He was standing next to a book rack handing out prayer books to everyone who came in. People were talking to him while enjoying some wine and cheese in a “pre-oneg” before services. An Oneg Shabbat is the traditional time after Shabbat services have ended to enjoy a light dessert and some community time with the congregation before going home for the evening. Many congregations, like Am Shalom, have begun to host a “Pre-Oneg”, an Oneg Shabbat before early services as a means to engage people and prepare for worship in a new, innovative way.

Ed reports that he truly enjoys this role. He likes to see members on a weekly basis, ensuring that congregants and guests are properly welcomed. However, he does concede that he would like to see volunteer involvement increase. They have tried to enlist the help of board members and B’nei Mitzvah families, but these efforts have proven to be unsuccessful. When Ed cannot be there, either people can help themselves to prayer books, or the paid security staff helps.

In responding to my survey, Liz Hirsch, Executive Director at Congregation Beth Or, a 1,140 household in Maple Glen, Pennsylvania reports that B’nei Mitzvah families are required to serve as greeters the week before their B’nei Mitzvah service. She is also at temple on Friday nights on a regular basis to make sure people are welcomed and other details go smoothly, but reports that overall their welcoming program is not successful. Although B’nei Mitzvah families do show up for their assigned ushering duties, they are often people who are not strongly engaged in the congregation and are unfamiliar with much of what happens at Beth Or. As such, if a problem arises or if they need to find something or someone, the welcoming B’nei Mitzvah family often must ask Liz, or another knowledgeable lay leader or staff member for help.

On the other hand, Leslie Sporn, Executive Director at Temple Sharey-Tefilo Israel, a 900 household congregation in South Orange, New Jersey has a greeter system that is completely lay led. A member of the board keeps a schedule, and members of the congregation rotate welcoming responsibilities throughout the year. While Leslie does attend Shabbat worship, she usually does so only when there is a large program of some kind.

The situation is very similar at East End Temple, a 300 household congregation in New York City where Sharon Shemesh serves as the Administrator. Not only do their B’nei Mitzvah families usher on Friday night and Saturday morning, but they also have a member of the board who helps to coordinate the ushering responsibilities, too. Much like Leslie, Sharon attends Shabbat at her temple if there is a special event, but otherwise, greeting and welcoming is a lay led effort.

At Temple Chai, a 975 household congregation in Long Grove, IL where I serve as Executive Director, we have a system in place that requires the involvement of our B’nei Mitzvah families to serve as “Welcoming Families” in the months leading up to their B’nei Mitzvah. Our families hand out prayer books at Friday and Saturday services. In addition, we assign a member of the board each week to be a Friday night Shabbat greeter. I am usually at services as well on Friday nights, and enjoy being at the front door to wish everyone a Shabbat Shalom as they enter the temple. If someone comes in, and they seem to be a visiting guest, I try to introduce them to a member of our community so they don’t need to sit by themselves.

However the system is administered, significant thought and attention needs be paid to how we welcome our guests and worshippers. Not only does our warm and sincere welcome make people feel more comfortable, but it is fulfilling our sacred responsibility as the host. Wolfson writes, “A warm
greeting eases the unspoken anxiety a guest feels at being a stranger and immediately answers the first question anyone in a strange place asks: Will I be welcome here? For the host, the act of hospitality is a gesture of spiritual generosity, uplifting the soul. It is an offering of oneself, an invitation for connection between human and human and, in that meeting, between human and God.”

For the temple executive director or administrator, a delicate balance needs to be found. If lay leadership of the congregation knows that a staff person will be there to fulfill the responsibilities of greeting and welcoming, perhaps they will feel that significant lay involvement is not necessary. However, many in the field of synagogue administration see Shabbat attendance as an integral part of their job, and while at temple, very naturally fulfill the welcoming and greeting role.

The larger implications of Shabbat attendance by professionals will be addressed in detail later in this paper, but in finding that balance between professional and lay leadership in a Shabbat context, we can consider the Kabbalistic teaching of Tzimtzum. Isaac Luria, rabbi and mystic from the 16th century, taught that God created the world first by contracting to allow an empty space so that a finite and independent world could exist. “(God) contracted Himself into a central point with His light in the middle. He contracted this light and then removed Himself to the sides encircling the point at the center. This left an empty place, an ether, and a vacuum around the point at the center.” If God had not contracted, had not “stepped aside” and created vacuum, then the world would not have been created. There would have been no space for the world to exist.

In administering the Shabbat welcoming activities, perhaps the Executive Director needs to exercise a bit of Tzimtzum as well. The concern may be that if the Executive Director does not stand by that front door and offer congregants and guests a warm welcome, then no one will. If that is the case, this lack of welcoming can be interpreted as the result of a choice made by the lay leaders of our congregations. If welcoming is important to our boards, then they will develop a way to ensure that someone is at that door every Friday night. Ideally, the Executive Director will still be in the building, but the concentration should be on congregant welcoming congregant.

This is not to suggest that the Executive Director should be hiding in the shadows, and this is not to suggest that the Executive Director should by shying away from offering a warm and enthusiastic welcome to members and guests. There is no magic formula, but every effort should be made to develop a system that results in a congregational wide culture of welcoming. In some of our congregations, this will happen only when the Executive Director contracts, and allows the space for a world of “spiritual generosity” to be created in the resulting “empty place”.
“Any community consisting of at least ten Jews is obligated to set aside a structure where people may enter to pray at the appropriate times. This place is called a synagogue.”

Maimonedes, Yad, Tefillah 1:11

Every Friday night all over the world, Jews are walking into synagogues. They may be saying yartzeit in memory of a loved one who died long ago, or they may be coming to watch their 3rd grader participate in leading Shabbat services with their class. There may be a Scholar in Residence giving a talk on a subject of great interest to the community, or they may be in from out of town for a grandson’s Bar Mitzvah. There may even be a nationally renowned musician or scholar involved in leading services.

The professional and lay leaders of our congregations plan each and every Shabbat very carefully, but there is no way to always know why someone is walking through the front doors to join the community in worship. As such, while there may be special programming offered week in and week out during Shabbat, it cannot be forgotten that the most important tangible thing happening in our temples on Friday night is ultimately the Shabbat worship itself. It is our worship that truly binds us together as a community, and ultimately, it is the primary reason we are at temple.

Perhaps it was a mistake for me to visit Congregation Solel, a 445 household congregation in Highland Park, Illinois where Allan Litwack is the Executive Director, to research this paper. I grew up at Congregation Solel. Not only was my uncle the rabbi, but I was the president of the youth group and my entire family was very involved for many years. Regrettably, circumstances do not bring me to Solel often these days, so when I do visit, I find myself basking in fond memories, seeing people I have not seen in a very long time, and generally just enjoying the comfortable and familiar surroundings. So, while my Shabbat evening at Solel was truly wonderful, I found it challenging to view everything with an appropriate “outside” perspective as I researched my FTA paper.

For most of their Friday night and Saturday morning services, Solel is using a new chapel which was added just a few years ago. The larger sanctuary, the space I am used to from my childhood, is reserved for B’nei Mitzvot and services and programs with larger attendance expected.

This new chapel is located on the complete opposite side of the building from the front door, so people must walk through all of Congregation Solel in order to get to their worship space. There were greeters throughout the building to get me to where I needed to be, and along the way, I even ran into a few old friends who made me feel especially welcome. One could argue that such a long walk required in order to get to the chapel is unfortunate, but I found this walk to really be a journey of preparation. I first walked through a pre-school area where I saw children’s Jewish artwork on the wall, and then I walked past the coat room. Not only was I able to hang up my winter jacket, but I also fondly remembered hiding with my brothers amongst the big, heavy coats in this space as a child in a futile attempt to escape services. I smiled. I passed by a picture of my uncle on the wall.

As I walked through the social hall, a necessary leg of the journey to the chapel, I saw families leaving the Tot Shabbat service that just ended. Everyone was very relaxed, enjoying a cup of juice, a taste of challah, talking and laughing, and chasing kids around the room making sure they did not misbehave.
There were more greeters in the room to help direct us to the chapel. Once I finally arrived at the chapel, there was an usher handing out books and people were taking their seats as the service was about to begin.

I always found this time, the time I entered the sanctuary, to be my favorite time of my Shabbat visits. Heschel wrote ""The seventh day is like a place in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere." After my drive to the congregation, after parking my car, after hopefully finding the right front door to use and hanging up my coat, I savored those first steps into the sanctuary, and the first recognition of that special Shabbat atmosphere. Every congregation is unique with how people enter the sanctuary, and how people find their seats and prepare themselves for worship. It was these particularities, these unique congregational personality traits that I found so fascinating to observe and enjoy.

Before worship can even begin though, synagogue leaders must first make sure that congregants enter the sanctuary in a timely manner so they too can savor those first moments inside their sacred space. We often do such a good job of welcoming people and creating community that people forget that they are at temple for worship, and don’t enter the sanctuary until they are being corralled in by an enthusiastic and often harried usher. Some congregations find this to be a much easier process, and everyone enters on their own with just a little encouragement.

At Congregation Ner Tamid, a 700 household congregation in Las Vegas, Nevada where Nancy Weinberger is the Executive Director, congregants know to enter for worship when a board member begins to read announcements about programs, classes and worship times for the week to come. At Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, a 1,300 household congregation in Baltimore, Maryland where Jo Ann Windman is the Executive Director, the clergy is in the lobby welcoming members and guests, and when it is time for services to begin, the clergy walk into the sanctuary followed by the congregation. At some congregations, music coming from the sanctuary is the signal that services are about to begin; at other congregations people just know to enter at the right time.

Both Beth Emet in Evanston and Am Shalom in Glencoe had community time with some light refreshments before services began. If preparing for worship is indeed a journey, I found that giving your members and guests some formalized time for relaxing and talking before worship begins is a wonderful step along that journey. Rather than walking into temple after a busy commute, after a long day, and a long week, and being asked to immediately let all the worries and stresses of that busy week melt away, some sort of community time, or as some call it a “Pre-Oneg”, can go a long way to providing everyone with that often necessary time to relax, refresh and prepare for services. Only when we are prepared for worship, and open to participating in prayer, will we truly benefit from the intangible benefits worship and prayer has to offer.

At Am Shalom, their Pre-Oneg was offered in a lobby directly outside their sanctuary, which made for a very natural progression. Members and guests entered the building, hung up their coats, enjoyed a
cookie, some coffee and brief conversation, and then were handed a prayer book and a Shabbat bulletin as they entered the sanctuary.

At Beth Emet, the layout of the building proved a bit more challenging. Because their lobby does not provide the necessary amount of space to offer food and give everyone a comfortable area to stand or sit, they offer their Pre-Oneg in a social hall next door to the sanctuary. In order to enter the sanctuary when it is time for service to begin, people must first exit the social hall, walk through the lobby and then into the sanctuary. Bekki reports that it was difficult to get people into the sanctuary when it was time for services to begin, so working with her clergy, Bekki developed an entirely new ritual, a new leg of the journey to help her congregants prepare for worship.

When it comes time for worship to begin, the cantor calls everyone in the social hall to gather with him around a table. On this table, there are two Shabbat candles and several tea light candles. The cantor asks everyone to join him in the blessing over the candles, and then invites everyone to light a tea light of their own, so they can participate in the candle lighting mitzvah. After all the candles have been lit, the cantor and the rabbi lead everyone through the lobby and into the sanctuary for worship to begin.

This ritual has been successful for Beth Emet in that it actually gets everyone in the room they need to be in at the time they need to be there, and by the time services have begun, they have already participated in an important prayer. Their car has been parked, their coat has been hung, their thirst has been satisfied, and their temple has done a wonderful job preparing them to enjoy Shabbat services in a relaxed spirit of contentment and happiness with the distractions of the day largely behind them.

However, as hard as we all work to remove distractions from before our congregants and in our sanctuaries, there are distractions that we as synagogue leaders present ourselves. From hissing sound systems to reserved seats to sanctuaries that are too cold or too warm (or often, both!) to flyers and bulletins handed to people as they enter the sanctuary, we often give our worshippers the opportunity to focus on many other things rather than the prayers and music of our liturgy.

Sometimes, we see these distractions as necessary. So that the various programs and events throughout our temple community can be promoted to as many people as possible every week, many congregations produce a flyer or booklet of some kind to be handed out to members and guests as they enter the sanctuary. These flyers may include everything from program announcements to staff, board and clergy listings, to a brief history of the congregation, and many other valuable pieces of information as well.

This information is very well intended, and synagogue leaders believe strongly that without providing such information, members and guests would not have access to information necessary to enjoy and appreciate services to their fullest, or to be informed about all the wonderful things that are going on in their congregation.
Upon entering the sanctuary at Beth Emet, after the Pre-Oneg, and after enjoying the candle lighting ritual, I was handed a prayer book and a 4 page, 8 ½ x 11 service sheet. On the first page of the beautifully designed Beth Emet handout there is a Shabbat schedule for the weekend, a listing of staff and clergy, and some important words about proper Shabbat decorum cell phone usage.

On the first inside page, there is a service menu. The clergy realized that, if distributing a handout to worshippers is necessary, then providing a guide to worship for the evening would be most appropriate. As a member of the congregation for the evening, I certainly found myself referring to that page of the service sheet as the service progressed. On that page and the next, there are also detailed descriptions about upcoming programs and events. They also include background information on a “Prayer for the Week.” The week I was there, they included some fascinating information about the Aleinu prayer. The back page included the philosophy of Beth Emet, information about the prayer book, and other scheduling information. I found the service booklet at Beth Emet to do a wonderful job of promoting events while providing useful information about the service itself. Bekki reports that a member of her staff creates the service sheet each week with input from the entire staff.

The clergy felt it was important to avoid calling out page numbers throughout their service. One could argue that in this case, the clergy avoided the distraction of calling out page numbers during worship only to create another distraction by including the service menu their service sheet. However, this is clearly something that has worked well for their congregation.

The Shabbat flyer at Am Shalom was very successful in being informative about temple events while providing important information about the service and the world around us. It should first be noted that the Am Shalom flyer is beautifully designed. Printed in color each week, it stresses worship first, and temple events second. On the inside first page, two thirds of the entire page is devoted to a summary of the Torah and Haftarah portion of the week, and below that, there is also a detailed description of the Tzedakah recipient encouraging everyone to support a worthy cause. Then, after the upcoming events have been listed, after the listing of Yarzheit names, Am Shalom also lists the names of U.S. soldiers (Jewish and non-Jewish) killed in Iraq and Afghanistan during the last week. These names serve as a sobering reminder of the wars raging through the world in a very Jewish, and very honorable way.

Ed reports that they added the names of the U.S. soldiers upon the request of a veteran who belongs to their congregation, and that these lists have been well received.
The Shabbat flyer is created each week by a member of the office staff, and distributed to the entire staff for proofreading and further input. Final changes are made on Thursday so the flyer can be printed on Friday for distribution that evening.

To successfully administer the production of a Shabbat flyer, it is important to first adopt a uniform template that will be used from week to week. Such preparation will save a significant amount of data entry time. Also, with the amount of detailed information involved on most Shabbat flyers, having an established proofreading procedure in place is of the utmost importance. Between dates, times and spelling of names, there are multiple opportunities every week to get an important piece of information wrong. Proofreading will not guarantee that all mistakes are identified, but it will certainly go a long way. Proofreading procedures should include representatives of all levels of temple staff as they all have a different exposure to the information. An office secretary may know of a last minute oneg sponsorship while the cantor may be aware of a nick name preferred by that week’s Bat Mitzvah. Working together, the office staff can create a Shabbat flyer that is complete, and correct, and ready for distribution.

After Shabbat services at Congregation Solel, I asked Allan why there was no Shabbat flyer handed out to the congregation before worship began. Expecting to hear an intriguing story about a staff member who forgot to do their job that week, I was surprised to learn that Solel does not create a Shabbat flyer. Allan reports that for several years they did not create a flyer. A new rabbi began at Solel a couple of years ago, and he tried to introduce the weekly distribution of a Shabbat flyer, but it was never fully accepted by the congregation. Allan reports that with all the other communication their congregation receives, there is really no reason to hand out a Shabbat flyer at all.

Eleven survey respondents reported that they do not publish Shabbat flyer. Jane Sable-Friedman, Executive Director of Temple Beth El, a 500 household congregation in Aptos, California said that her congregation is trying “to go away from the paper altogether for greening purposes. We have one large poster that lists the announcements and the Yahrtzeits. We are actually doing the same now for our B’nai mitzvah services and including the list of Aliyot.” Congregation Ner Tamid in Las Vegas, Nevada has all their important information projected on a screen for people to read before services begin, and Miranda Escobar, Executive Director of Temple Beth Torah in Upper Nyack, New York reports that they did do a Shabbat flyer, but they realized it just became redundant as all the same information was already shared with their congregation through other means, and most nights, most of the Shabbat flyers would just end up on the floor or thrown away.

At many congregations, congregants expect to receive some sort of a handout when entering the sanctuary. If nothing else, it helps to pass the time until services start and inform about the activity and character of the congregation. Ideally though, in between the time that the sanctuary is entered and services begin, we as synagogue leaders would like to see our members enjoying their temple community through conversation, or just taking an opportunity to sit quietly in contemplation or prayer before services begin.
Heschel wrote, “The higher goals of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.” If the true goal of our Shabbat flyers is to promote events, there may be much more effective ways to achieve this goal. Unless the Shabbat flyer is brought home, or a program organizer makes a personal connection or invitation regarding a particular event, a brief mention in a Shabbat flyer alone is not going to be encouragement enough to get someone to attend an event they had not previously planned to attend. Yes, it is good to be informative; yes it is good to share yartzeit names; yes it is good to bring a community together through print, but perhaps the printed Shabbat flyer is more symbolic of the past rather than of ways we will inform and engage our communities in the future. Perhaps, we need to be more concerned about creating spiritual moments rather than flyers and handouts.
“And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”

Exodus 25:8

For many congregations, one of the primary challenges in making their Shabbat worship appealing to members and guests is the time worship is offered. Some congregations schedule their Shabbat worship to end in time for families to enjoy a Shabbat dinner at home. Other congregations schedule their worship to begin later, so families have time for Shabbat dinner at home before coming to temple. Still other congregations offer different options each Shabbat, recognizing that one service time will not work for their entire congregation.

Temple Sinai, an 1,100 household congregation in Denver, Colorado where Ruth Cohen is the Executive Director, has been experimenting with different schedules. Ruth reports, “We used to have services at 8:00 p.m. and the numbers started dropping. We did a survey, and found that the majority of our congregants wanted a 7:00 p.m. start time. Our numbers have been steady and strong since.”

Bill Padnos, Executive Director at a different Temple Sinai, a 900 household congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, reports that their services are scheduled so that families with young children can attend. Services on the first and third Friday of each month begin at 7:00 p.m. The first Friday is a Musical Shabbat, and the third Friday features a Tot Shabbat at 5:45 p.m. followed by a Shabbat dinner at 6:15 p.m. and dinner at 7:00 p.m. This format makes it very convenient for families to attend, and young children to get to bed at a convenient time.

At other congregations, they recognize that different options need to be offered every week. Terry Kraus, Director of Membership Services at Congregation Emanu El, a 2,300 household congregation in San Francisco, reports that they offer a wide variety of worship options throughout the month. A 5:30 p.m. service, which they have had for years, is available so that those who may need to say Yartzheit, or just want to enjoy Shabbat on their way home from work, can do so quickly and conveniently. In the last few years, they have also added a 6:00 p.m. family service, which they hold on site some weeks, and some weeks at locations off site. Also offered is a 7:30 p.m. service option which is more focused on specific interests. Sometimes, the services are for younger adults (20-30 years old), while other times they offer meditative or educational themed services.

Although Congregation Emanu El is one of the largest congregations in the country, smaller congregations are able to follow this same model as well, illustrating the fact that a community does not need to be large in order to benefit from a variety of program and worship times. Communities large and small are doing some very exciting programming on Shabbat.

Jill Cooper, Executive Director at Beth David Reform Congregation, a 380 household temple in Glandwyne, Pennsylvania reports that they schedule Shabbat worship to begin twice each month at 6:30 p.m., twice each month at 8:00 p.m., and the months when there are five Fridays they offer a “Synaplex” program on the last Friday of the month. Worship, programs and food for each Synaplex evening are offered with a specific theme in mind. Depending on the theme, sometimes services are offered before dinner, sometimes afterwards. There are anywhere from two to five different service options offered for each Synaplex evening, each one offering a completely different experience for
their diverse community. However the evening is formatted, it always ends with an Oneg Shabbat for everyone in the building. Jill really enjoys their Synaplex evenings at Beth David. “The beauty of Synaplex is that although folks are spread out through the temple during the evening, the community all comes together at the Oneg. The timing of all Synaplexes keep in mind the various ages of the families/individuals that attend.”

At Congregation Somrei Torah, a 300 household congregation in Santa Rose, CA, Executive Director Fran Brumlik reports that they offer a wide variety of Shabbat worship each month. The first Friday, they offer an informal intergenerational worship beginning at 6:00 p.m. where a story is shared rather than a formal d’var Torah. This is appealing to families with small children. The service content is fun for the kids, and it gets them home at a reasonable hour. For those congregants who want opportunities for learning and growth, the second Friday each month Shabbat begins at 7:30 p.m. and features a shorter service followed by a guest speaker or a discussion. The third Friday, services begin at 6:00 p.m. and features a Klezmer band, while the fourth and fifth Friday is a more formally structured service.

However and whenever services are offered, synagogue leaders must first acknowledge that one service time or style is not going to appeal to an entire community. For congregations in metropolitan areas, perhaps services should be early, so members can participate on their way home from work, whereas congregations in suburban areas may want to give members a chance to get home and enjoy a Shabbat meal before coming to temple. When can children attend? Do people prefer to worship before they eat, or after they eat? Should programming outside of worship be offered, and is this something that the community will respond to positively?

The ongoing goal should be that Shabbat worship and programming offer an opportunity for relaxation and reflection, not worry and stress about scheduling and family time. When possible, community surveys should be conducted so synagogue leaders have a sense of what their congregation wants. While it will be virtually impossible to please an entire congregation, a sense of understanding about the preferences and schedules of your community will go a long way towards creating a worship schedule that is cohesive and convenient.

In the administration of Shabbat, special attention also needs to be paid to several details regarding the sanctuary. How can we as executive directors and administrators contribute to creating a holy space? How can our work provide our members and guests with a deeper connection to their worship and spirituality? Although many sanctuaries were designed with permanent pews, more and more sanctuaries are designed with movable seating. In our efforts to make people feel connected to their clergy and worship, is it best to set up chairs in rows, in a circle, or in another configuration? At Temple Chai, our clergy likes to set up chairs in a circle whenever possible. It gives them the opportunity to be much closer to everyone in the room, and the “walls” between performer and audience, between clergy and congregant, are broken down so it is easier for everyone to pray together as one cohesive group. When we have larger Shabbat events, such as grade level Shabbats when religious school students help to lead worship, or if we have a musical performer or scholar in residence, our chairs are set up in rows out of a necessity for us to fit as many people in the room as possible, and for everyone to see what is happening on the Bima.

The chair configuration in the chapel at Congregation Solel was very interesting. Allan acknowledges that figuring out the best way to arrange chairs in this space has been an ongoing challenge. While the
The room is designed as a circle, the chairs were set up as almost two semi-circles joined at one side, thereby creating an oblong triangular shape. There was a member choir singing the night I was there, and while there was a pulpit in the sanctuary, the rabbi led services standing in the center of the room with no pulpit, no literature stand, and no microphone.

In a way, this all contributed to somewhat of a hectic feel in the room. This is not a negative perception at all, as I very much enjoyed my worship experience at Solel. I could look at the choir, at the rabbi, or I could easily look at the other members of the congregation. The fact that the rabbi did not use anything to lead services except for the prayer book in his hands made all the congregants feel that much closer to him. There was nothing between the rabbi and the congregation.

At KAM, the chapel was set up in a very similar manner. There was also a member choir singing the night I was there. The chairs were set up in two sections of the room and the member choir occupied the third section. The worship atmosphere at KAM felt very comfortable. People were loud, boisterous and happy as they sang along with the choir. While the kids were not encouraged to run around the room, they certainly did so with a sense of freedom and empowerment, and this contributed to a valuable community feel in the room.

Not only does the set up of the chairs enhance worship, but so does the lighting design. At Temple Chai, we have worked hard to establish a lighting scheme designed specifically for Shabbat worship. We wanted our worshippers to be able to see clearly, of course, but we also wanted to create an atmosphere that would encourage everyone to feel relaxed and peaceful. The bima is lit brightly, but the rest of the sanctuary is somewhat dimmed. For older buildings, while such lighting control is not always available, the rooms themselves often achieve the same results just based on their architecture and design. For instance, the sanctuary at Am Shalom is much older than the rest of the building. As the ceilings are very high, there is a very natural, airy feeling without the lighting being too bright. At Beth Emet, the sanctuary also feels older. The ceiling is high enough to offer a feeling of ample space in the room, and the lighting is far away enough that a very nice, quiet atmosphere is achieved. About midway through the Shabbat I spent at Beth Emet, I noticed that I could see the traffic light on the street corner outside through the stained glass next to the ark. I confess that during worship I amused myself by wondering if they ever tried to synchronize their worship to what was happening in the outside world. (Red light: stand, green light: sit, yellow light: silent prayer)

When it is possible to control sanctuary lighting, experiment with different settings. Too often, lights are turned on to their brightest setting with not enough thought given to how a different look in the room may contribute to an overall feeling of relaxation and peace.

Services have been scheduled. Chairs have been set up. Lighting has been set. Everything is set to go, and after people have been able to find the synagogue with ease due to good, brightly lit street signage, they have walked safely from their car to the front door because the grounds have been thoroughly cleared and cleaned. They walk into the front door of the synagogue, and they are warmly greeted by lay leadership and staff. They hang up their coats, and they are signaled that it is time to enter the sanctuary for worship. Finally, Shabbat has arrived.

Dr. Ron Wolfson suggests that at this point in the evening, synagogue leaders can still do a lot to make worshippers feel comfortable and welcome. The time everyone is finding their seats in the sanctuary, getting ready for worship is a wonderful opportunity for our clergy to play an important role in
welcoming. “The rabbi and cantor have particularly important roles to play because of their high visibility. Typically, the rabbi and cantor in many synagogues greet congregants as they leave the sanctuary. Why not welcome people when they come into the sanctuary? This can change the entire atmosphere of the worship. By walking through the sanctuary and onto the pulpit instead of entering from the side of the pulpit, the clergy demonstrate that they are representatives of the congregation. Their welcoming serves as a welcoming on behalf of everyone in the room.”

As services begin and congregants settle into their seats, the doors to the sanctuary close. Music begins to play, and the clergy calls the congregation to worship. Ideally, the lobby is being monitored by either professional security or volunteer ushers, and the executive director or administrator now is free to help welcome late comers, prepare the oneg, or maybe even join the congregation in prayer.

Shabbat presents an ongoing challenge for the temple executive director or administrator. Those who are observant Jews may very well choose not to work at all on Shabbat, because for many Jews any kind of work on Shabbat is strictly prohibited. Other administrators stay away from temple on Shabbat not because it is prohibited, but because they see this as their opportunity to enjoy Shabbat themselves. After serving their Jewish community all week, they may prefer to stay at home with family and friends. Still other executive directors and administrators see their presence at temple on Shabbat as a vitally important part of their job. They help to make sure everything runs smoothly, they get to see and talk to congregants, and they have an important opportunity to stay connected to how congregants are responding to different aspects of their Shabbat worship.

Heschel writes that “The Sabbath itself is a sanctuary which we built, a sanctuary in time.” This time of Shabbat, this “sanctuary” that the executive director or temple administrator has helped to create is sacred, and it is a sacredness that the Jewish executive director or administrator should be able to enjoy, and take advantage of, along with the rest of the congregation.

Many in the field of temple administration feel that whenever they are inside the walls of the congregation where they work, they must always be “on duty”. They don’t feel comfortable sitting in worship as there are always things to do, always details to be addressed, and the members of the congregation often have a level of expectation that those on staff will be working rather than enjoying worship.

Jeanne Adler, Executive Director at Congregation B’nai Jehudah in Overland Park, Kansas wrote a wonderful FTA thesis about different ways that temple executive directors and administrators are able to live a spiritual life, and the challenges inherent to finding opportunities for spirituality. Jeanne writes, “Most administrators agree that celebrating Shabbat is one of the biggest challenges to their Jewish life. It is the time that our jobs most interfere with living a spiritual life. For many administrators, our job requires us to work on Friday night and Saturday morning. This requirement detracts from family and personal Shabbat observation.”

Regardless of implied or suggested expectations made by clergy and lay leadership, there are executive directors and administrators who prefer not to work on Shabbat, and there are those who welcome this part of their responsibility. In responding to my FTA survey, Jeanne wrote, “I do feel it is appropriate for me to be here (for Shabbat) on a regular basis. It is the time I can connect face to face with a lot of people. I get to personally greet and say Shabbat Shalom to many of our older members who attend on a regular basis. It makes people feel special to have me as well as the clergy there
talking to them and saying hello. I also like to watch out for anyone who appears to be new or alone. I always make a point of talking to them and maybe introducing them to at least one person so they feel like we noticed them here and cared.”

David Lamden, Executive Director of Temple Solel, a 700 household congregation in Paradise Valley, Arizona describes the inherent conflict of temple executive directors and administrators working on Shabbat well. “I am not saying it is appropriate or not appropriate, but I don’t believe that I can ever be in the building and not be working. I am constantly keeping an eye out for people who are standing/sitting by themselves to try and connect them to other people. I’m always worrying about the temperature of the room and the sound system, and I am watching the room for potential security reasons.”

David’s comments go right to the nature of the career of temple administration. The Jewish temple executive director or administrator is, to an extent, often expected to live a Jewish life. Clergy and lay leaders want them to be involved at temple, want their kids in the religious school, and want to see them attend worship and events. However, as David points out, when the executive director or administrator is in the building, it can be challenging to find that personal space necessary to sit, to reflect and to pray. There always seems to be an issue that requires attention, an issue that takes away from the enjoyment of Shabbat.

Jeff Katz, Executive Director of Temple B’nai Or, a 600 household congregation in Morristown, New Jersey wrote “I believe an (executive director) or (administrator) should be free to worship in their ‘home’.” If this happens to be where they work, that’s great. In many situations, Shabbat presence at work may be limited to special occasions. Each community needs to find a way to come together and create sacred space and a sense of family. If this can only be done with paid/professional staff, that suggests a larger challenge.”

In a way, Jeff seems to be speaking to the issue of Tzimtzum mentioned previously in this paper. Sometimes, only when the executive director or administrator is not there, when that contraction of spirit and space has taken place will the community do the work that needs to be done. Work that otherwise might be done by the executive director or administrator if they were in the building. Jeff makes the point that everyone should feel free to worship as they wish, and sometimes, that will be a workplace, sometimes it will be home.

In responding to my FTA survey, Esther Herst, Executive Director of Temple Beth Am, a 1,000 household congregation in Seattle, Washington writes “I have never been required to attend Friday night services and I prefer it that way. Sometimes we go because of a scholar or some other special event but our family has always seen Friday nights as a set-aside for family time and we value that tradition.”

In considering the issue of working on Shabbat, not only must we consider the importance of spending time with our families, but we must also remember that by the time Friday night rolls around, the synagogue executive director or administrator has already spent a very full, very busy week at the temple. Ellen Franklin, Executive Director at Temple Judea, a 1,000 household congregation in Tarzana, California writes, “By the time Friday night rolls around, I am ready to (go home)...If I can sit and pray, that helps a lot, so I really try to also make it a spiritual time for me.”
Fifty-five respondents to my FTA survey indicated that they do work on Friday nights. Some indicated that it is a clearly communicated expectation, and others indicated that it is the way they like to work, and they see this as a necessary, valuable and rewarding part of their job. Alternatively, 39 respondents indicated that they do not work regularly on Shabbat. For some respondents, it is not necessary to work on Shabbat, for others it is not expected.

Janet Bronitsky, Executive Director at Temple Emanuel, a 1,500 household congregation in Denver, Colorado put it beautifully when she wrote in her survey response, “As senior staff and co-CEO with the rabbi I should and I want to be there. This is my congregation - if I do not attend and see value in being there, why should anyone else?” Livia Thompson, Executive Director of Central Synagogue, a 2,000 household congregation in New York City writes, “It’s a wonderful time for me to kiss, share stories, listen, watch, learn and feel good about the congregation and what is happening. I have come to really appreciate and enjoy this time and while I do not forget that I am working, it is a pleasure. I do not try to worship, although I have taken a private moment when I need to for a personal reason. I generally stand in the back and everyone knows where to find me, and do. I also like being able to get a global view of what is happening so I can comment to our events and maintenance staff, and A.V. people if necessary, and give feedback to the clergy as appropriate.”

There is no easy answer to this question, and work schedules are often determined based on a number of different variables, such as the long standing minhag of the congregation, the Shabbat availability of the staff, and the needs of the members and lay leaders. Personally, I feel that Shabbat is a wonderful time to be at the temple where I work. I enjoy the energy in the building on Shabbat. I enjoy seeing our regulars every week, and being able to stay connected on family, work and health issues. I feel honored to be a face of the congregation, and people really feel like they have the “ear” of the leadership of the temple when they talk to me before services or during the Oneg Shabbat. I learn a lot about what our congregants enjoy about our worship and being at temple, and I learn about what they do not like. In so many ways, my Shabbat attendance is educative, it is positive, and it is personally rewarding.
"The kiddush or Oneg Shabbat is one of the most important elements of a service." 22

The Oneg Shabbat, the traditional time for refreshments and community, is really not part of the Shabbat service at all. However, perhaps in the above quote Dr. Wolfson is looking at our Shabbat experience holistically. From the time we enter our synagogues before services begin, to the time we leave at the end of the evening, we are participating in a Shabbat ritual. The entire time we are at temple, in one way or another, we are in Shabbat services.

Shabbat observance means many different things to different people, and as already explained in this paper, people come to temple on Friday night for many different reasons. Whether the reason for coming to temple is for celebration, for mourning, or just to find respite at the end of a busy week, a Shabbat evening should always include an Oneg Shabbat, community time over coffee and cookies.

While on its face, coffee and cookies may not sound very important or transformative, the Oneg Shabbat is perhaps the most important event that takes place in our temples on any kind of a regular basis. Some congregations have an Oneg Shabbat before services begin, some have it afterward, some have it both before and afterwards. Whenever the Oneg Shabbat is held, it provides invaluable opportunities to create and foster community. While anticipating worship, or while reflecting fondly on the music and prayers just heard, people are often at their very best during on Oneg Shabbat. Collectively, the synagogue community during an Oneg Shabbat is supportive, thankful and generally in a very positive mood. Whether the Oneg is before or after worship, it is the time that a community comes together to celebrate itself. It is the time relationships are made, perpetuated and savored.

Dr. Wolfson writes, “I cannot emphasize enough the importance of relationships. The very sacredness of the community depends on the quality of the relationships that are established within it, to the degree to which members have taken up themselves – not deferred to the professionals – the values of b’tzeelem Elohim and hachnasat orchim. When a congregation lives and breathes these values, the sacred community comes alive; it becomes a place other people want to make a part of their lives. A sacred community is built on sacred relationships.” 23

Unless opportunities are given for relationships to begin and grow, relationships of depth and meaning, the synagogue will never become a place of people truly connected to each other or to God. Very often, these relationships begin at the Oneg Shabbat.

As previously mentioned, the Oneg Shabbat at Congregation Beth Emet takes place before worship begins. There were long tables filled with cheese, crackers, fruit and cookies. Coffee, tea, wine and soft drinks were available, and people were sitting around the room at round tables relaxing, talking and eating. Upon entering the room, two gentlemen who were clearly friends, came up to me to welcome me, to introduce themselves and to talk. They were both on the board, and they obviously took their responsibility of being ambassadors for their community seriously. They realized early on that I was not a prospective member, but they made me feel a real part of their community nonetheless. After services at Beth Emet, there was a table with slices of challah and glasses of grape juice and wine for everyone to enjoy on their way home. One more opportunity to wish your friends and family a “Shabbat Shalom” greeting before heading home. One more opportunity to create community. One
more opportunity to perpetuate sacred relationships.

At Solel, services began with no Oneg Shabbat beforehand. But, as soon as services ended, we found ourselves in their social hall with an absolutely delicious challah, cookies, coffee and juice. The rabbi had already said the prayers over the challah and the wine during services, so everyone began to eat as soon as services ended. As the room was filled with people I knew and loved from my youth, this Oneg Shabbat was truly a joyous time. My father’s friends all gave me a big bear hug, my mother’s friends gave me a kiss on the cheek. They asked about my folks, they asked about my wife and kids. The community enveloped me, and I truly felt like I was home.

At Am Shalom, even though there were very few people I knew, there was an undeniably warm atmosphere in the room. I enjoyed seeing people walk up to Ed as he was trying to manage several things at once to give him an enthusiastic hug, and to catch up on the events of the week. Actually, Am Shalom hosted two Oneg Shabbat celebrations. The night I joined them for Shabbat, their 5th grade students were participating in worship. After services, the adults went to one area for an Oneg, and the families with children went to another. This allowed the children a little more freedom to enjoy their evening at temple without concern that they would be too raucous for the adults who just wanted some quiet time to talk and visit with old friends.

The people at KAM were incredibly warm during their Oneg Shabbat. My wife, daughter and I were all engaged in conversation with people throughout the social hall who made us feel very welcome, and a real part of their community. It felt as though this community truly relished this weekly opportunity to be with each other. Although we stayed for a long time, the temple was still full and active by the time we left.

In reflecting on my Shabbat visits, and in reading the responses to my FTA survey, it is clear that the Oneg Shabbat at every temple is special, and deeply meaningful. Gail Donner, Executive Director at Congregation M’kor Shalom, an 800 household synagogue in Cherry Hill, NJ writes that their Oneg Shabbat is “all about the people (and the brownies!). It’s wonderful to see people talking to each other, B’nai Mitzvah families happy, and happy to show off their synagogue to their families. We have some regulars who don’t want to leave and let the maintenance staff clean up around them.” John Humelker, Executive Director of Shir Tikvah Congregation, a 400 household congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota simply said, “It is done by the congregation and everyone helps out. It is not always the best food or great wine. But it is real and folks are warm and friendly. Kind of down home!”

Manuel Mesa, Executive Director of Congregation Kol Tikvah in Parkland, Florida reports that the atmosphere at the Oneg Shabbat at his congregation “is one of joy, congregants are truly friends and they enjoy catching up with one another.”

However, in order for our congregants and guests to even have the opportunity to socialize and connect in the first place, our Oneg Shabbat celebrations must be well administered. Synagogue executive directors and administrators must first ensure the oneg is adequately financed, food is purchased and served, coffee is made and served, and that the building is cleaned at the end of the night.

At Temple Chai, every B’nei Mitzvah family is assessed an Oneg Shabbat sponsorship fee. The fee appears on their temple bill several months before the Shabbat being sponsored by them. The income is carefully budgeted based on the number of B’nei Mitzvahs we expect to have throughout the year,
and we carefully track the expenses against that income line.

Some weeks, we may spend a little more for an extra special event, but we usually provide the same food week in and week out. Sometimes, people may complain after seeing the same type of cookie served repeatedly, but most everyone realizes it is the community that makes our Oneg Shabbat special. The cookie is secondary.

Marc Swatez, Executive Director at Congregation B’nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim, an 1,100 household congregation in Deerfield, Illinois reports that their Oneg Shabbat is financed through their operating budget and donations, with additional support from their Sisterhood. Marc and his staff help to ensure that enough food is purchased each week, but it is the Sisterhood that arranges to have volunteers there helping to serve food, punch and coffee. Livia Thompson, Executive Director at Central Synagogue in New York, New York on the other hand has staff handle all of the responsibilities. “Staff sets up the oneg, monitors the food, cleans up, etc.”

So much of how an Oneg is handled depends on the expectations of staff and the level to which lay leadership chooses to be involved. Kathryn Mawyer, Executive Director at Congregation Beth Israel, a 400 household congregation in Charlottesville, Virginia explains that their Oneg Shabbat is completely lay led and organized. They have a pot luck system that is managed through an online list that is promoted in service flyers and weekly email announcements. Whoever volunteers to provide food each week is the Oneg Host. Kathryn reports that the “Oneg Host sets up the food and beverages, replenishes as necessary, and cleans up afterwards. Staff and clergy have no role.”

Most respondents to my FTA survey indicated that the food for the oneg is either purchased by themselves or another member of their staff, with a few congregations indicating that the food is purchased by affiliate groups or volunteers. However the food arrives at temple, it is important that there is some kind of food provided. Not only is food the very nature of an Oneg Shabbat, but it is around food that we so often talk, laugh and support.

In his on-line blog, movie critic and journalist Roger Ebert openly talks about his inability to eat due to the loss of his lower jaw to cancer. In his January 6, 2010 entry “Nil by Mouth” Ebert writes, “So that’s what’s sad about not eating. The loss of dining, not the loss of food. It may be personal, but for, unless I’m alone, it doesn’t involve dinner if it doesn’t involve talking. The food and drink I can do without easily. The jokes, gossip, laughs, arguments and shared memories I miss. Sentences beginning with the words, “Remember that time?”

In important and sacred ways, during peaceful moments, the Oneg Shabbat can be seen as the very basis for the existence of our synagogues. Without that time concentrated on community, and only community, we would not know with whom we pray, celebrate, mourn and learn. It is through the observance of Shabbat, and our enjoyment of the oneg that we create, in Heschel’s words, “a Sabbath cathedral.”
“All who labor for the community should do so for the sake of heaven.”

Pirke Avot 2:2

At Temple Chai, it is usually our group of “Shabbat Ladies” who are the last to leave. This group of lovely women, ranging in age from their late 60’s to their early 80’s, have all lost their husbands in recent years, and they all look so forward to coming to temple together on Friday night. The formation of this group was not planned, it happened organically. They all arrive within 10 minutes of each other, and find seats together in the same area of our sanctuary every week.

Every single one of them gives me a big hug and kiss when they arrive. They eagerly grab their prayer book, hang up their coat, and let the joy of Shabbat and community wash over them as services begin. During the Oneg Shabbat, they grab a cup of coffee and a cookie or two and sit around a large table to tell stories about their grandkids and memories of their husbands.

One week, the Shabbat Ladies were not at temple. I learned that they all had other commitments that one particular night, and they could not make it to temple. I did not know that at the time, and the very next Monday I called each one of them to make sure they were OK, but primarily I wanted to let them know they were missed. The next Friday night, one of them walked up to me in tears and told me that this is the only place in her life that truly misses her if she is not there.

At the end of the night, after parents have taken their young kids home to bed, after people who have worked hard all week go home for a good meal and a restful sleep, after the Shabbat Ladies wish the rabbis and me a “Good Shabbos”, our temple is empty. Except for our maintenance staff doing a last clean up, and our clergy moving Torahs around for worship the next morning, there is no one at Temple Chai.

This is the time I like to walk through our sanctuary and turn off the lights, look at the room illuminated only by our Ner Tamid, the eternal light above our ark, and reflect on the fact that just an hour or two ago, this very room was alive with vibrant music, lights and prayer. Our sacred space was home to something meaningful and real, and it will be again next week, the week after and every week from now on.

Heschel wrote, “For the Sabbath is a day of harmony and peace, peace between man and man, peace within man, and peace with all things.” In this peaceful place, community was created.
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NOTE: “Administering Shabbat”, an online survey of the members of the National Association for Temple Administration from May of 2011 was used and attributed throughout this paper.

COVER PHOTO: ©Larry Glickman, 2010
Shabbat cannot be celebrated without community, and accomplishments cannot be achieved or enjoyed without the support of good friends, colleagues and family.

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Larry Glickman
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