



The Shefa Journal

5768/2008

*The mission of the Shefa Network is two-fold:
To bring together dreamers from within the
Conservative Movement, and to give their
Dreams an audible voice.*

Welcome.

In the introduction to the first Shefa Journal ([5766](#)), editors Sara Shapiro-Plevan and Rabbi Bill Plevan wrote:

“Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the Shefa enterprise ... is the way it has avoided strict boundaries between the intellectual and the practical. ... This is as it should be, because a religious movement needs both a coherent vision with philosophical rigor and historical perspective, and the practical wisdom to enact this vision. Usually, these two tasks are not done well by the same people, but that too is a bias that leads us to divide the world into “theorists” and “practitioners,” as if the two are from different planets. If the Conservative movement is going to succeed in creating spiritual communities in its schools, synagogues and camps, it will have to bring together the theological visions of the movement’s intellectual lights with the practical wisdom of professionals and lay people. The most important accomplishment of [the Shefa Network] may be that it has begun a conversation that includes all of these essential voices.”

As of May 2008, there have been over 30,000 hits to the Shefa website (www.shefanetwork.org) and over 2000 messages posted to the listserv. The conversation has continued.

In this, the third Journal of the Shefa Network, we have collected some of the email contributions of Shefaniks between January and May 2008. This Journal is a brief “Shefa’s Greatest Hits”, bringing together a snapshot of the sparkling analysis and spiritual empathy so many Shefa contributors continue to demonstrate. The topics included are “**Instrumental Music on Shabbat and Chag**”, “**Conservative Judaism and Social Justice**”, and “**Merge the Movements.**”

The difficulty of navigating the layers of Jewish tradition associated with every piece of Torah is exacerbated when the text feels like an impenetrable system. But that's not what the layers are. Every attempt to explore the text is truly an act of relationship, a coming closer for the reader, the authors, the content, and the ultimate goals. For a Jew (and for others), this means that by desiring to come close to God through Torah, multiple relationships are fostered - with the authors, with the generations of readers and commentators, with self, and hopefully with a community of fellow readers/dreamers.

The two-fold mission of the Shefa Network, **to bring together dreamers from within the Conservative Movement, and to give their Dreams an audible voice**, is one we invite you to join by sending a blank email to shefa-subscribe@yahogroups.com. Share your dreams.

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

Rosh Chodesh Iyar 5768
May 5, 2008
Berkeley, CA

Instrumental Music on Shabbat and Chag

****Note:** This conversation was sparked by the sharing of an article from the Forward (Jan 02, 2008): "Synagogues Become Rock Venues: Congregations Using Music To Revitalize Membership Rolls" by Rebecca Spence (<http://www.forward.com/articles/12388/>)

Message 1898

I think that music can and should play a key role in revitalizing membership rolls. As I have posted before, I think that Synagogue music is most readily and seriously facilitated by utilizing Cantors -- not as performers as perhaps was once the case, but rather as leaders and teachers as well as daveners.

Instrumental music raises halachic issues, as does the concurrent use of amplification and microphones, and is a major departure from our traditions. However, if a knowledgeable Cantor (re music and halacha) and Rabbi (re halacha) feel that music is appropriate and that the Cantor has gone as far as he or she can by voice and chorus, and still feels that the help of instruments will build Judaism, Kol Ha Kovod. Unfortunately, in the admittedly limited number of services I have attended that used instrumental music, it didn't add anything but rather took away from what for me is a keep part of communal prayer - communal participation. Most recently, while visiting another city, I attended a musical Friday night concert/service which did have enjoyable excerpts from many of my "Friday night" favorites --- typically the beginning and ending of a subset of prayers. Compared to a Friday night voices only Carlbach service this concert was loud and overpowering. The acid test for me at the Friday night service/ concert --- no one got up and danced or even clapped, let alone chanted. So I remain skeptical that music will be anything but a novelty except perhaps in some very special environments and with very careful study and training.

I also note in the Forward article, only part of Rabbi Yoffee's views of the Reform approach to Shabbat were mentioned. For me the key to his sermon was his assertion that the Reform movement has to rethink its priorities re:the Friday night service, and build a full day Shabbat.

On my above mentioned visit to another city, I also attended a Chabad Saturday morning service. There was no doubt that I fully experienced there an intensive community immersion in the music of Shabbat, without any musical instruments, as the hundreds of attendees participated in the davening and responses to the shaliach. Unfortunately, of course, I could only sense the participation of ½ of the Jewish community -- the males --- so that was as always a major turn off.

Shabbat Shalom,
Robert L. Smith

1912

Last Shabbat in our synagogue, we had someone playing music on an electric keyboard during kiddush. The kiddush was for a birthday celebration. I don't think there's a consensus, but I know that there are a few approaches I've encountered.

- allow instrumental music, but only on Friday night
- allow only acoustical instrumental music -- not electronic.
- and now, apparently, anything goes.

I had the issue of having to explain to my daughter why she's not allowed to play the electric keyboard at home on Shabbat but it's allowed in Shul. I was also a bit distressed that the music was not to enhance worship, but just there for background music during lunch. I'm a very musical person and I'd love our services to be more musical, but I've always thought that there are vocal ways to achieve this without needing to use instruments.

Dahlia Schwartz

1913

I would like to 'chime in' from the perspective of a musician. I feel strongly that in the context of tfila, music should only be used as an expression of prayer - not as a purely musical performance (I fell this way about hazzanut but that's another topic). Music can, for me, add to the prayer's meaning. In fact, I often view music as a form of prayer. I think it is best to use non-electronic instruments because they really are not necessary and interfere with the connection between man and God which is the essence of prayer.

Music is a gift from God and should be treated as such. This is a very 'Eastern' way of looking at music which have have found very present here in Israel and in the Galil in particular. Instruments also have a very positive effect on the musical/vocal abilities of congregations. They help people sing 'on key' and provide a framework with elements like tempo, pitch,etc... I have witnessed a more sensitive attention to those elements in congregations and communities that use instruments over those that do not.

Shavuah tov from the Galil,
Glenn Tamir

1920

The distinction between electric and acoustic is quite simple:

- Electric instruments use electricity to amplify sound, ie. electric guitars, electric pianos or organs, etc...
- Acoustic instruments use the natural acoustics of the instrument, ie.. acoustic guitars, acoustic accordions, etc...

The issue of electricity (from a halahic point of view) would already have been decided by the community. Do they already use microphones to amplify the cantor or rabbis voices? If so, then this issue I suppose becomes one of aesthetics. The same can be said for carrying instruments.

While there may be many highly trained vocal musicians in the Conservative community, I reiterate my point that instruments will definitely enhance the vocal abilities and aptitude of congregants - especially young ones still developing their voices. I have witnessed, over the last thirty years, a marked decline in the ability of members of Conservative shuls and other communities to sing on key and with steady tempos and this is more evident in those communities that do not use instruments. The Reform and Conservative communities I have been involved with that use instruments have on average, better musical vocalists. There are exceptions and I am only generalizing based on my personal experience.

As for where musicians will get the training to express prayer through music, the same place they get it from singing - through the kavanah they employ and by simply learning the melodies and chords of the tfilot. There is an ample supply of sheet music for most common tfilot, especially those Carlebach or Debbie Friedman melodies that are very popular among communities.

I have seen it printed somewhere that around 50% of Conservative communities outside of the NY Metropolitan Area us instruments during Shabbat. It would be interesting to know if this is true and what the actual nationwide figure is.

Glenn Tamir

1916

I myself do not play instruments on Shabbat, and the synagogues I grew up in did not incorporate instrumental music in worship (or in kiddush/celebration) on Shabbat or chag. So it was something of a surprise to me when we moved to DC in 2005 and heard electronic instruments being played on Shabbat at a bat mitzvah celebration (which was when I learned that shul policy permits the use of instruments for "Jewish music," whether as part of the service or of the celebration), and discovered that Adas Israel's main Friday night service (which also lights candles long after sundown) and Saturday morning services use instruments regularly. We generally daven with groups that love music but don't use instruments--a variety of lay-led services ranging from the liturgically traditional (Ruach Minyan and Traditional Egalitarian Minyan) to the less-than-traditional (Havurah; Zoo Minyan).

That said, I actually would be bothered less by instrumental music--at least, the kind I've generally

encountered in shul settings--at kiddush than during the service. As long as no one's making ME play an instrument, I'm not bothered by others having a different approach to the halachic appropriateness of instrumental music on Shabbat & chag. The times that I've davened in a service that made good use of instruments (yes, even electronic ones!) on Shabbat--particularly the recent Sixth in the City Shabbat with Rick Recht--it's been a great Shabbat experience, and I wouldn't want to trade it for one with no instruments, lots of mumbling, and little ruach. My main issue with instrumental music is that in the kinds of davening where I've seen it used in shuls, it tends to either create or reinforce a performer-and-audience model rather than a participatory one -- but that's not the fault of the instruments, it's a feature of the **way** they're being used by those leading the service.

It doesn't have to be that way -- it's just that I've only had the pleasure of instrumental music enhancing, rather than impairing, my Shabbat davening and celebration on a very few occasions. (But, as I've said, there have only been a handful of occasions either good or bad where I've had instruments being played on Shabbat or chag in a Jewish context--so I make no claims for my sample size!) In other singing and musical settings, I certainly have had the experience Glenn described: "Instruments also have a very positive effect on the musical/vocal abilities of congregations. They help people sing 'on key' and provide a framework with elements like tempo, pitch, etc..." It has *not* been my experience so far to have noted "a more sensitive attention to those elements in congregations and communities that use instruments over those that do not," but that probably says more about the kinds of communities I've been part of vs. the ones that Glenn has been part of, rather than anything conclusive about instrumental music's power to help or to hinder communal worship. :)

And as for "what someone does in their home"? I want my friends and family to *do what they do* -- yes, while being sensitive to what *I* do and don't do...but if my dad (non-Jewish anyway!) or my in-laws (Catholic) or my brothers (not observant) want to put on some music on a Friday night, I won't object. If they asked me to play bass for them, I'd decline (besides the fact that I'm not any good at it yet anyway!) -- but I'd happily sing along if others whose Shabbat practice (or for whom Shabbat is not a consideration!) want to play instruments for fun. The Torah has 70 faces, and each of us can be a face of the Divine Presence to one another -- and I see it as a beautiful (if sometimes complicated!) aspect of this multi-faceted experience that our practices and preoccupations differ...even on such things as the use of instruments on Shabbat & chag!

Shavua tov!
Becca Boggs

1921

A few observations regarding music and instruments on Shabbat:

(1) Although it's true that tuned and well-played instruments do, in theory, maintain proper pitch, melody, and tempo, they do not necessarily support, encourage, or enhance congregational singing. In fact, a cappella singing (or singing with rhythm instruments to keep tempo) requires the singers to fill in the harmonies, or even to produce fullness in the sound of the melody. When instruments are filling out the range of voices, it's easier to sit back and listen.

(2) I may be waxing nostalgic here, but I also seem to notice less attention to pitch and tempo among our ba'alei batim. I'm no Luddite, and I DO think things like karaoke and "Guitar Hero III" are kind of cool. But I also believe reliance on technology has weakened understanding and use of that most expressive of all instruments, the human voice. The popularity of Jewish a cappella groups is a hopeful sign -- now we just need to bring an appreciation of "The Sacred Harp" back to liturgy.

(3) Exploring instrumental music in the synagogue is an incredible opportunity for learning and for recapturing a lost and ancient part of Jewish culture. Instead of (or, if you prefer, in addition to) seeking out contemporary expressions and instrumentation, I'd like to see us bring out and reconstruct truly traditional instruments. Not a tamborine -- a tof!

(4) "It takes a village to sing a song" -- Think of the myriad uses of singing in aboriginal cultures: welcome songs (and dances), night songs, worship songs, thanksgiving songs, celebratory songs, mourning songs. The power lies in the fact that EVERYONE is engaged in the action. It's not enough just to KNOW the songs -- everyone has to listen to everyone else, to FEEL the others singing. Congregational singing is community-building in one of the most profoundly spiritual ways.

(5) Congregational singing is also incredibly empowering -- it means the congregation OWNS the liturgy. Not the cantor, not the rabbi, not the musicians -- the kahal. This is one of my primary objections to musical instruments. Intentionally or not, it must -- to some degree -- become another incarnation of the clergy-led, clergy-centered service (substituting "band" for "clergy"). When the kahal sings as an organic body, IT determines the tempo, the number of repetitions, whether or not the niggun will continue without words after the t'fillah is completed, etc. When there are musicians, THEY make that call, disempowering the kahal in this regard.

(6) Claims that musical instruments "enhance" the service often misunderstand the meaning of the word "enhance." You can only "enhance" what's already there. More often than not, folks I hear talk about instruments really mean that they'd like to take a davening experience which is uninspiring and not engaging and do something to fix it. Fix it FIRST -- THEN "enhance" it.

L'fi aniyut da'ati . . .

Bididut,
Rabbi David Kay

1922

I have many thoughts on this as I have been leading services with instruments in a Conservative congregation with Rabbi David Wolpe for close to 11 years. I best express my thoughts in songs (more people listen) then in words (few people take me seriously).

Therefore I offer this bulletin message from the pen of Cantor Steve Stoehr. Steve is the Cantor of Congregation Beth Shalom in Northbrook Illinois. This past the invited me to their community to lead a Shabbat service where they used instruments for the first time.

Craig Taubman

*Rabbi Stephen Wise used to say, "Our quarrel is not with Jews who are different, but with Jews who are **indifferent**." The recent Distinguished Speaker Series featuring Craig Taubman erased any sense of indifference or apathy from the landscape of our synagogue that night. Whether one is in favor of new expressions of Shabbat worship, content with their present involvement or opposed to the concept of evolution of tradition in this specific measure, the fact was that people were stirred. As clergy you have heard the rabbis and me say "the task of a true prophet, or in our day clergy, is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." This Shabbat was a wonderful litmus test for our congregation to explore its personal theology and philosophy regarding spirituality and Shabbat. The discussion carried over into one of the most passionate dialogues we have had at the Board level of this congregation in many years. Craig, a master musician and inspirational neshoma, soul, transformed our sanctuary into a castle courtyard, where we danced and sang and entertained the Shabbat Queen.*

1924

I was intrigued by the following comment in the piece that you forwarded:

"Whether one is in favor of new expressions of Shabbat worship, content with their present involvement or opposed to the concept of evolution of tradition in this specific measure, the fact was that people were stirred."

Me, I think we should all be "in favor of new expressions of Shabbat worship" -- even when we are "content with [our] present involvement"!

That is, I am--and feel I *ought* to be! -- always in favor of the *concept* of "new expressions of Shabbat worship," no matter how much I like the ones that I already take part in. Without some sense of invention, re-interpretation, and creative engagement with Shabbat worship, we stagnate. Now--clearly, I don't like/enjoy/approve of *every individual* "new expression" that someone uses -- *but* other people are not me, and may love what I can't stand, and vice-versa. :)

Shavua tov,
Becca Boggs

1930

Personally, I have no objection to musical instruments on Shabbat from a halachic perspective. I've enjoyed Shabbat services (including some with Craig Taubman) that had music involved, and I even introduced musical instruments on Shabbat to two congregations I served where I thought it might help liven things up a little for the congregants.

But aesthetically, I find I really don't like musical instruments on Shabbat so much; all too often it makes the experience more one of going to a concert than going to shul.

When a congregation flies in a wonderful musician, like Craig and his crew, for a Shabbat the congregation has a great experience; but what happens then next Shabbat? Attendance, and ruach, is back to whatever it normally was.

I have the tremendous zchut to live in ir hakodesh, Yerushalayim, where we have no shortage of minyans that can rock your soul with music, and what's amazing is they do it each and every week, without instruments, and without even needing a particularly gifted leader. The kahal sings. The kahal harmonizes. On Friday night I usually go to a Carlebach minyan in Arnona, about a five minute walk from my house, where the hundred or so people who show up every Friday sing - and pray - with great enthusiasm. If I want even more enthusiasm and harmony and don't mind walking another ten minutes I can go to Shira Chadasha.

That Friday night experience that you can have in Jerusalem nourishes my soul. It's one of the reasons I made aliyah - leaving the pulpit rabbinate in the process.

One thing I don't get - why is there no harmony in American synagogues? Go to a church in America, and you hear Americans singing in harmony; go to a shul in Jerusalem and you'll hear Jews singing in harmony; so why is it that American Jews can't seem to sing in harmony?

Rabbi Barry Leff

1931

This question of musical instruments on Shabbat has clearly **struck a chord** with Shefaniks--I can't remember ever seeing so many posts on a single subject!

Most of the responses to the original post are personal reactions to instrumental music on Shabbat and the personal situations that result from being faced with this alternative (both good and bad). My understanding of Conservative halacha is that instrumental music is not forbidden, and is, like with most issues, up to the Mara D'Atra, the rabbi in a synagogue responsible for the halacha of the community, to decide how it will play out in their community. That said, I propose two things:

1. When we experience a strong reaction (either way) to this issue, we should try to look beyond our reaction to determine what it is exactly we are reacting to. We should talk to people who need (or don't

need) music and try to understand what it is they are doing. A few posts mention that they would feel compelled to move their home before accepting music in their shul. Rather than move our homes, wouldn't it make sense first to see if we can move our hearts? If music is one way people who are leading the service feel they can help others to access Divinity, is it impossible that there is something to be learned through this approach? Do we not owe it to ourselves as thinking Jews to seriously explore what is going on--both internally and in community?

2. Music is permitted in CJ, but it isn't found everywhere. That is because halacha is not a static process--halacha is evolving, and must evolve. One recent post referred us to a few sources on this issue. We should learn what we can--and try not to make a decision based only in personal belief. The word 'halacha' itself implies movement (it is from the root h-l-ch which means 'walk.'). If our law were to be stagnant, it would more properly be called 'matzav'--a pediment, or fixed, unmovable object (parenthetically, it is also the word used for the current seemingly irresolvable conflict between Israel and Palestine.) We have an obligation to keep halacha evolving. This is done from within, i.e. through the rabbis, but just as often in the Talmud, the law evolves from the outside: a conversation waxes esoteric then, at a standoff, the rabbis are sent out to 'see what the people are doing' (puk haze)...and it is here that I believe we have an opening. If this is the way people are relating to the tefillot (and it is clear that some of us are) then the rabbis would be loathe to prevent people from the ultimate goal--feeling close to God. If music is a problem, it isn't because it is against halacha (Craig and others are halachic Jews!), rather it is because it is against our personal preferences and biases. Refraining from hearing music during a mourning period is understandable, but even in orthodox weddings, there are chairs just outside the function hall (well within hearing of the music) for mourners who are permitted to attend parts of the ceremony that occur after huppah.

It seems to me to be a symbolic, not categoric, removal of self from the celebration, and any more than that seems like a matter of personal preference.

Kol tuv,
Karen Silberman

1933

This conversation is one which matters so deeply. And one thing that's become clear, in large part thanks to the articles by Rabbi David Kay and Reb Karen Silberman, is that an instrument - ***be it human or handheld*** - must be in the service of connecting with, and not presenting to. Chazanim in the Conservative Movement have largely not been trained in helping their voices (as the NYTimes article here - <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/10/arts/music/10ratli.html> - puts it) remain "*rascally*," and **just as many rabbis do**, see themselves as presenting tradition to "the congregation." We all must learn to see our liturgical choices as representative of our own and others' souls' collective yearnings, and not a tradition only attainable by artists and scholars. The living Conservative Movement is moving exactly in this direction. Clergy is beginning, and perhaps should be partnered with by fellow seekers, to re-invision ourselves "in concert" with communal yearnings.

An important article which brings this into the sharp focus of the Conservative and Reform Movements' Chazan-training is [Synagogue Music in the Modern Era](http://www.myjewishlearning.com). ([myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com))

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Menachem Creditor

"At 88 Mr. Seeger is still a song leader, helping to run a singalong at the monthly meeting of a volunteer environmental organization near his home in Beacon, N.Y. "I like the sound of average voices more than trained voices," he said. "Especially kids singing a little off pitch. They have a nice, rascally sound."

1935

I've been in contexts where my husband and I are among the most observant/most "traditional" people in the circle, and by contrast also in ones where we've been ideologically on the progressive end of the spectrum or "less machmir" -- often at the same time, with the same behaviors, just in different circles.

To me, the ethical questions implied in some of the issues of inclusion that I'll be alluding to below are far more troubling than those of halachic questions about the use of instruments, electricity, or motor vehicles on Shabbat. I am often in positions where what I do is more "restrictive" than what is done around me or in a non-home-shul environment where I am a visitor... but I have much less problem saying "we don't play musical instruments at home on Shabbat, but they do so at this synagogue" than to say "we don't treat other adult Jews differently based on their gender, sexual orientation, or family background -- but they do so at this synagogue."

So the questions/comments that I can imagine/anticipate for future-theoretical kids of ours, would include these sorts of answers from the "other side", as it were-- answers that, like yours, I feel to be *true*, but at times somewhat teeth-grittingly painful in their confrontation with behaviors that you yourself/I myself would not want to endorse, while trying to maintain a pluralistic stance that is accurate about our Jewish world:

Question: Is _____ who would not count you in the minyan or have you read Torah or lead

davening a Conservative /Masorti Jew?

My response: Yes, _____ is a Conservative/Masorti Jew, different people and different communities see halachic issues regarding gender differently.

Question: Is _____ who does not think that our lesbian and gay friends should be rabbis, have their relationships acknowledged in the Jewish community, or be allowed to act as role models (--even though _____ is very happy to have *your* help in leyning and davening and glad you are so well-versed in Jewish tradition-- which you were nurtured in during your grad school years primarily by 2 very learned Nice Jewish Girls who are now both married to other Nice Jewish Girls) a Conservative/Masorti Jew?

My response: Yes, _____ is a Conservative/Masorti Jew, different people and different communities see halachic issues regarding sexual orientation differently.

Question: Is _____ who does not eat non-hechshered cheese or drink non-hechshered wine, though there are Conservative rulings that permit a somewhat wider range of consumption than just those that are hechshered, a Conservative/Masorti Jew?

My response: Yes, _____ is a Conservative/Masorti Jew, different people and different communities see halachic issues regarding such issues of kashrut differently.

Question: Is _____ who suggested referring to your kitchen as "kosher-style," because it is not *hechsher-only* for non-meat items, a progressive/non-Orthodox Jew? (*we began keeping kosher in the UK, where very little is hechshered but much is marked "suitable for vegetarians" or included on the Really Kosher Food Guide, and so have generally continued to accept items that are "kosher by ingredients" [when they are not meaty or going to be used with meat, which we almost never cook anyway], as is acceptable also for much Sephardi Orthodox kashrut, in our kitchen alongside those that are specifically certified kosher & hechshered)

My response: Yes, _____ is in fact a member of the clergy in a progressive movement, but this person moves in circles where kashrut to (non-Sephardic) Orthodox standards is what is expected when one keeps a "kosher kitchen," and the kind of kitchen their family keeps. There are differences in the ways that Jews in different denominations and from different traditions, as well as within those groups themselves, approach issues of kashrut and holiness with regard to food and eating and drinking.

Question: Is _____ who repeats at the seder table what he learned in his Orthodox day school about the implacable transhistorical hatred of "the goyim" for the Jews (in a context where there are not a few non-Jews who are part of the family present) a Jew who shows derekh erez for others?

My response: Jewish traditional texts and commentaries show a wide variety of approaches to almost everything, including relations between Jews and non-Jews. He and his parents and family clearly love and welcome all the members of our extended family who are with them for Passover (and have worked hard to accommodate *us* within walking distance), and do not regard my father, my brother's fiancée, or my cousin's wife as "strangers" or enemies for being non-Jews, or my husband, another cousin's wife, or others as essentially different because they were not raised Jewish before choosing Judaism as adults, nor do they ever suggest that they are not "really Jewish" because their conversions were Conservative. Their behavior and their own words show derekh erez and ahavat yisra'el, even if some of what they

are offering as traditional wisdom that they have received & are passing on may seem at times not to be as accepting or generous.

As for the issue that you raise toward the end -- "how can I tell my kids, yes you come to shul most Shabbatot, and your friends are coming for this big billed program of music in service, but you can't join them, because we don't listen to music on Shabbat" --

I am curious as to whether you would see any reason to go ahead, at some point, and enter into that grey zone (where so much of Conservative/Masorti Judaism operates; it is there, not in the extremes of black and white, not through the polarizing filters that seek to reduce our world of complicated light and shadow into opposing simplicities without exception and without explanation, that our real lives happen, and that intellectual engagement lives) that says "we do not play instruments on Shabbat, but some Jews in our community do; we would not usually be going to a service with this kind of music, and most weeks we won't, but this week you can join them and see what it's like." I don't know what your community's stance on gender-egalitarian issues is, or what your practice is, but my thought is the following:

If you were a non-egalitarian halachic Jew, in a community with a non-egalitarian main service, and an alternative egalitarian service was offered one week, would you tell your children "yes, you come to shul most Shabbatot, and your friends are coming for this big billed program of a service where women will participate equally with men, but you can't join them, because we don't have women do those things" -- or would you let them go check it out (regardless of whether you yourself go with, or what you and they choose to do on other/future weeks)?

Or, in another vein:

Are there some times where it makes sense to say to a young child, "at home you have to finish *all* your vegetables before you can have dessert, but at Grandpa's, if he says that you can have dessert as long as you *try* at least 3 bites of the vegetables, that's okay" (that is, to accept or even seem to endorse "different rules for different places," which does not invalidate the "home rule" when at home but does allow for some flexibility and recognition of varied contexts) -- and some other times where it makes sense to insist on maintaining the "home rule" even when elsewhere (e.g., "your bedtime is 8pm, and even though your cousins don't mind if you stay up 'til 10pm, I know that you get cranky when you don't get enough sleep, so I want you in bed at 8pm as usual")? -- in our lives, we are rarely absolutists in every facet, nor should we be: even at a relatively young age, won't children be able to live with and even (if only later) come to appreciate and understand why some rules are flexible or context-based and others are not? In that case, it's less a question of "what do we tell the kids?" than of "what is it that we want to be telling/teaching the kids?" For me, the lessons of pluralism, and of trying to see and understand a variety of practices that are in some way alien *but not repugnant or ideologically unacceptable to me*, would lead to me lean to the side of exposing my [theoretical] kids (and, indeed, myself!-- I've davened in all kinds of places/ways that I wouldn't choose for every week, and some I wouldn't want to choose again at all--but I always learned something from them and from my responses to them) on occasion to davening practices that are a bit outside of my own "comfort zone" or chosen approach but that are meaningful to and shared by other members of my synagogue/religious community.

I can see why one might say "no, this is not what we do, and so even though I am telling you that in this kind of pluralistic community there are a variety of practices and valid approaches that result in different

understandings of what is halachically permitted or forbidden, **this** is one that conflicts with *our family's* practice and observance, even if that's not the case for the families of your other friends, so we aren't going to be present at it" ... but, as I've said in a previous post, I myself do not necessarily feel uncomfortable being present in an otherwise-meaningful-and-interesting synagogue/davening environment in which *I* am not asked to do anything that transgresses or upsets my own Shabbat observance, but in which others are doing certain things that I do not do, though I know them to be among the permissible range of practices in the Conservative/Masorti community (not just playing instruments but also such matters as doing the triennial Torah reading, or a hechi-kedushah instead of silent Amidah + Reader's Repetition, or reading some key prayers in English -- this last one being to me is a much bigger shock & aesthetic issue/ "problem" for me, much of the time, than those others, even though it is not at all a halachic issue, since davening in the vernacular is permissible).

And I also see the value of the concept of *na'aseh v'nishmah* ("we will do and we will hear/understand": experiential learning, discovery through doing) in this aspect of our Jewish lives. A highly intelligent and cultured family friend who grew up in prewar Europe recently told me that my bat mitzvah, in 1987, had changed his mind about women in the synagogue service: "I was quite traditional in my views, and I didn't really think that girls should have a bat mitzvah of this sort. But then I came to your bat mitzvah, and you did such a wonderful job, and I decided there really wasn't any good reason why a woman should not do these things." He's not a chauvinist; he would not have said that women are less competent in other areas of life -- but until he *saw it being done*, and saw it done well, he had no reason to re-examine his thoughts on bat mitzvah or women in synagogue life (the intellectual component), or to think that he would appreciate a service where a woman was taking a major role, which was otherwise entirely foreign to what he'd been brought up with or been part of up to that point (the experiential component).

So I understand, but do not hold, the position that if I do not play instruments on Shabbat then it is also impermissible for me to be listening where they are played. I don't play them in part because I am agreeing in the practice of making a fence around the Torah, though I don't feel that everyone else necessarily needs to accept such a big fence. I'm not deeply compelled by the halachic reasons for prohibitions on instrumental music -- I don't do what I do out of any agreement with the strands of tradition that regard it as imperative to 1) avoid mimicking the temple practices that we are deprived of and should not return to until we have 'restored the Levites to their song" etc. or 2) avoid the temptation to engage in forbidden work if some part of the instrument should break and I be tempted to fix it. (A friend told me that because of this issue he *davka* doesn't have a problem with playing piano on Shabbat: "if something goes wrong, I have no ability at all to fix it --so there's no temptation!") Anyway, you've given us plenty to think about -- and I'm curious to know how things work out for you & your family with regard to these issues, the alternative service, and how you deal with a community that has some members who do things you don't (drive on Shabbat; allow instruments on Shabbat) and/or who don't do things that you do (attend Shabbat services regularly; keep kosher; avoid being present in any venue with music during the mourning period)...

B'shalom,
Rebecca Boggs

1939

One of the primary benefits for me of this network has been the opportunity to establish a friendship with others who are a part of our Shefa community. The support and care I have received during the past two years of death and bereavement have been a spiritual life preserver for me. It is no coincidence that I make this journey just a few days after the second yartzeit of my father, z"l.

That our discussion has been focused on the role of music in our communal settings proves for me yet, again, that our world is filled with sacred synchronicities! At our first Shefa conference almost two years ago, our conversations were bookended by the soulful music of Shirav, the name Menachem Creditor and David Paskin gave to themselves and the other musicians who have come together to marry lyric, melody and meaning. Our conference was held two weeks after my father's death; thus, I was a mourner, sitting outside when the music was being played. My navigation of halacha made room for recorded music in my car or my home; without the music of Shirav, Craig Taubman, Debbie Friedman, Noah Budin, Sam Glaser and others, I would never have survived the extended 1 year, 9 month mourning period that was to unfold as my mother, z"l, took ill three months after Dad died.

I know that many of my reflections on this network have focused on the topics of death and mourning and how our wisdom tradition supports us through the waters of grief and bereavement. As I move to the next stage of my life, turning 50 as an orphan with three teenagers (my oldest is graduating high school this June), I wonder what lenses I will wear as I observe and reflect on the issues and challenges facing serious Conservative Jews in the 21st century.

Without putting any specific glasses on, I do want to add my voice to the chorus which is so passionately singing about the role of instrumental music and music in general in our davening experiences. I have read most of the posts with great interest this week and have found myself agreeing or remembering how I once agreed with just about all the opinions expressed. I live in a community that has four different Conservative congregations – I belong to a small one that makes a lot of room for participation of lay leaders both in leading and singing. I also became a regular at another Conservative synagogue's daily minyan during my extended avelut and learned how to lead daily davening. For me, singing is the core of my prayer experience. We own a second home in southern Jerusalem, so I have davened a lot at Shira Chadasha, Kol HaNeshama, Moresheit Yisrael, Yakar, Kedem, Yedidya, etc.....and frankly, my sense is that the energy found in any spiritual space depends upon a "critical mass" (number depends on context) of caring people coming together with the common goal of contributing their voice to the sacred sounds that center, surround and transcend. The questions that are being implicitly asked throughout our discussions are as follows: 1) how do we as activists help our communities develop that critical mass? 2) how do we encourage and support our current clergy to be innovative and take some risks? 3) how do we generate new energy and enthusiasm within existing institutions that have an embedded culture – i.e., how does something new come in without the innovation appearing contrived or disruptive? There have definitely been good answers to these questions offered throughout these discussions – but as we all know, each community is so different. Each community is going to have different sets of questions and different answers.

I became a member of Shefa because I desperately needed to start feeling the energy of the Divine within normative Conservative Judaism. While I firmly believe that halacha is a fundamental component of Conservative Judaism, I also firmly believe that halacha is not meant to constrain or restrict my relationship with God. Our early 21st reality is that the communal institutions of normative Conservative

Judaism (i.e. synagogues) are being challenged by new forms and a willingness of our best and most passionate (i.e. USYers, Ramahnicks, Nativers) to go elsewhere for their communal davening experiences. Unless there is room within our halachic parameters for innovation, we will lose our next generation. I know that from my own children. Thus, while once I was opposed to a lot, now I find I am more open to a lot. The beauty of Conservative Judaism is that we have our norms and we have ample room within our norms to find those points of intersection where we can have a relationship with each other and with God. That is the song I sing. With or without an instrument. I prefer without, but on the other hand, I would never turn down an invitation to sing the Hashkiveinu duet with Craig Taubman!

In closing, I encourage all of us as passionate Conservative Jews to do what Conservative Jews do best –with an open mind and a caring heart, challenge each other yet support each other as we work toward the common goal of building passionate spiritual community that allows each Jew to cultivate a relationship with the Divine which serves as the boat in which one navigates the waves of emotion that make up our lives!,

Fran Immerman

1942

I'm finding the discussion of musical instruments on Shabbat to be quite fascinating, for several reasons. My shul (where I am rabbi and we have an AJR trained cantor who is great) actually has a "super-bylaw" as it were in its Constitution which prohibits the use of musical instruments at religious services (no, not just on Shabbat, at religious services!) We get away with some instruments at Slichot and Purim but when I wanted to institute a kid-friendly "Shabbat B'Yachad" service on Friday nights, the Board took several months to decide that the little rhythm shakers and plastic tambourines we wanted to give to the kids were "toys" and not "instruments" and therefore permitted under our bylaws.

A bit of pilpul? Probably, but it was really good that the Board owned this issue and not me and the Cantor. Not only that, but because we have traditional people who were concerned about the feeling of Shabbat prayer being unadorned, as such, we've actually created a good teaching moment, in my opinion, in the family service, when we ask the kids to put the toy tambourines away because now we're doing a prayer (Shma, Amidah, Kaddish) which is a "quiet" prayer as opposed to the ruach we encourage for the Kabbalat Shabbat songs.

Now, I make no claim that this is the right solution or balance for everybody- and our Shabbat B'Yachad family services is the only one with rhythm shakers and toys- but so far, it's worked really well to help families have a joyful, fun erev Shabbat service (once a month, the rest are our late Friday services) while keeping the traditionalists comfortable. In fact, we've brought back some empty-nesters who like the family service but had dropped out of the late service- something I hadn't anticipated.

Finally, on the issue of aveilut and musical instruments, I have been in aveilut myself 2 of the last 4 years, and have looked into the issue quite a bit. I don't have the sources in front of me, but if we take a "positive-historical" approach (that is, trying to figure out what the early authoritative sources were getting at in their social contexts) it seems to me that the halacha of aveilut is concerned with helping the mourner avoid parties and light-hearted social occasions.

That is, the context of the musical instruments seems very relevant here- there's a huge difference between musical instruments played for party or for dancing and, say, going to a performance of Mozart's Requiem in Dm? Or to push the point further, I can't imagine that in our world, the prohibition on live music during aveilut was meant to keep a Jew from attending her Catholic friend's funeral where the organ accompanied the funeral mass.

There may be people who wish not to hear musical instruments at all during the entire period of aveilut, but it seems to me that Conservative synagogues are not always obligated to accommodate those who choose a stricter understanding of halachic obligation than the Conservative halachic process might dictate. I personally think this is especially true when a more flexible reading of the tradition might make our synagogues more "user-friendly". I know full well that the reason they often aren't usually isn't about halacha at all, but sometimes it is, and sometimes the needs of the many might outway the desires of the few.

It's uncomfortable for me to say, but it's something I've observed in shuls outside the main centers of Jewish life.

kol tuv
Rabbi Neal Loevenger

1946

One aspect of the discussion on music and musical instruments on Shabbat which we seem to be talking around -- and which resonates deeply for me -- is the notion of "havdalah", "separation."

In my home, we refrain from playing musical instruments and using electronic devices. This is not so much from a halachic objection to these activities as a desire to make havdalah -- a distinction between "uv'dan d'h.ol", things done during the rest of the week, and Shabbat.

The deepest spiritual significance of Shabbat is, for me, that very distinction from the rest of the week. Too often, we think of Shabbat in terms of what we CAN'T do. Instead, I believe we need to teach Shabbat observance in terms of the liberating and empowering ability to say "No" to the demands and distractions of everyday living.

It is incredibly empowering to be able to ignore the phone, internet, TV, etc., etc., etc. We don't use the phone on Shabbat -- again, not because of halachic objection -- but when it rings, we answer. Imagine the feeling of power when it's a phone solicitation (which, thank God, it almost always is -- and not a true emergency) and we can interrupt the pitch by saying, "Excuse me, today is my Sabbath and I don't discuss or transact any business."

How many times does a phone solicitor every apologize to you for disturbing you? Well, it happens almost every time, after we say that!

The absence of musical instruments is -- again, for me -- part of that sense of stepping away from the everyday world. This is why nusah. ha't'fillah is also so very important to me. Shabbat nusah. belongs to

Shabbat, and I revel in the musical differences between weekday, Shalosh R'galim, Yamim Nora'im, and Shabbat. When I hear those particular motifs and melodies, it's all part of the Shabbat experience.

The strains of "Y'did Nefesh" tell me that the 25-hour vacation from the pressures and problems of the work week has begun.

Bididut,
Rabbi David Kay

1948

This has been a fascinating discussion, and I have learned much. Personal disclaimer -- I was raised in a "traditional" (although now fully egalitarian) conservative congregation in NJ where musical instruments would never have appeared on erev shabbat, shabbat or yom tov. When my own family and I ultimately affiliated, we joined a "traditional" conservative congregation (although now with parallel egal/non-egal minyans on shabbat and yom tov) in NJ where musical instruments would never appear on erev shabbat, shabbat or yom tov. Thus, I am still taken aback when I encounter acoustic instruments on shabbat, let alone electric. I have only experienced the latter once, while attending a Ramahnik's bat mitzvah at large formerly conservative-affiliated congregation on the Upper West Side of Manhattan

My personal discomfort notwithstanding, I now have a much better appreciation for the reasoning behind use of musical instruments on these days.

Nonetheless, Michael Lewyn's contribution below brings to the forefront my biggest problem not just with this discussion, but a theme that generally runs through Shefa discussions regarding halacha. Specifically, his reference (and it is by no means exclusively Michael's concept, so he should not regard this as a personal critique) to "moral reasons" as a basis for modifying halacha. I have read widely as to the Conservative approaches to halacha, and I have concluded that "moral reasons" actually means "what we all think is good, right now, is correct".

And here, my troubles begin.

First of all, in the context of changing halacha, I doubt that there are hardly any issues we can identify on which there is sufficient universal agreement, whether its the hecksher tzedek or homosexuality. And I am generally disappointed by the absolutists supporting those positions (generally considerably younger than me) who fail to see the substantial nuances that may enrich the views of others, and frequently outright reject them as misinformed and wrong.

Perhaps more importantly, I prefer to take the long view to the development of halacha. In case my writing style hasn't already given this away, I am a practicing lawyer. But I recognize fundamental differences between how secular civil law develops, and how I believe halacha should develop. Religions are fundamentally conservative institutions. They usually lag developments in civil society. This is not a bad thing. There is far more room for social experimentation in the greater civil society than there is in religion, particularly traditional Judaism (by which I include orthodoxy and conservative, but not reform or reconstruction), where so much has been directed not only to "holy service" but

protection and preservation of the community. Thus, I believe the development of halacha needs to be sheltered from "moral reasons". Why? Because today's "moral reasons" are often fleeting. They often reflect extremes which then balance out over time, only then reflecting a greater consensus. Oh, you want an example -- how about slavery in the 18th century. Generally acceptable back then! By the early nineteenth century -- uh oh, unacceptable. How about Zionism? How long did it take for the greater number of religiously committed jews (rather than the secular) come to accept the idea, let along support it?

I fear that along the path we presently tread, we will see the continuing secularization of Judaism, particularly Conservative Judaism. We will have adopted the popular ideas du jour, forfeited the magnificence of our tradition and conserved precious little.

Steve

Conservative Judaism and Social Justice

****Note:** This comment was posted in response to an article from the JTA (Feb 28,2008): “Arnie Eisen to Conservative rabbis: Yes we can” by Ami Eden (<http://blogs.jta.org/telegraph/2008/02/28/arnie-eisen-to-conservative-rabbis-yes-we-can/#more-198>)

1953

I am one of those folks who laments the fact that our movement does not have a serious Washington presence, and thinks that we could use it for much good. The lack of such a presence may in fact have something to do with the lack of vitality in our movement. Most NFTYites know that their movement has an office in Washington that advocates on behalf of Jewish concerns, civil rights, women's rights, the poor etc., and that certainly gives them a lot of pride in their affiliation with the movement.

I am skeptical as to whether that really explains the numerical success of the Reform movement, and I think we should see better evidence for this, as intermarriage rates are a much more likely explanation. So if we have something to learn from their example, its that having movement-wide sense of serving a greater purpose strengthens the vitality of the movement and might cure us of the myopia that currently reigns. That might result in some membership and financial gains, but I doubt it would counteract large scale demographic shifts.

Again, I would like to movement to take on social justice issues, but just taking one issue is not going to do much. It would be seen as act of desperation anyway, and getting people in the movement to galvanize around one social justice issue would be hard. The Reform movement's efforts have been built on long-held and deeply-felt convictions by a strong contingent of lay and professional leaders about where the movement should be on social justice concerns. We are years away from that. So while I would love to have our movement pay more attention to social justice concerns on the national level, I don't think it will do for us what it has done for the Reform movement, at least not soon enough to turn things around.

As I have said here before, the way to invigorate our core is to focus on what they already care about: good Jewish education, Jewish pride peoplehood and unity, and traditional communal worship. I think if we have the courage to believe that these are the things that will strengthen the Jewish people, then I think we can find a sense of common purpose.

I also think that there is a way our movement can look beyond the boundaries of our people to serve noble purpose in a way that is consistent with our core values, and that is to promote efforts in interfaith dialogue. This may not sound as inspiring as civil rights, and its true that interfaith dialogue is often self-serving on the Jewish side (we want to make sure they don't want to kill us). But I think that if we pursued it as genuine effort to strengthen our relationship with non-Jewish communities through education and dialogue (not necessarily political cooperation), then I think our movement would have something to be proud of. There are many reasons why an effort like this would be suited to our movement, but let me mention three important ones.

1) The Reform movement's social justice work emphasizes that which we have in common with other Americans. Interfaith dialogue (the way it should be done) is a way to learn about differences with other religions, appreciate them and affirm them, not "get past" differences. Educationally, this will instill a sense in our congregants that peaceful and friendly relations with non-Jews does not depend on giving up Jewish distinctiveness.

2) Good interfaith dialogue results in Jews learning more about Judaism, so it would be consistent with the movement's emphasis on education.

3) Interfaith dialogue can be very productive at the scholarly level, and the fact is that JTS remains the center of gravity and resources in our movement. They in fact already have an interreligious affairs center, which does public programs. We obviously would want to expand these efforts to the congregations in a way JTS currently does not, but I think taking on this effort as a movement wide commitment is consistent with the strengths and needs of JTS, and for that matter the AJU.

Rabbi Bill Plevan

Merge the Movements?

****Note:** This comment was posted in response to an article from the Jerusalem Post (March 13, 2008): "Merge Reform and Conservative Judaism" by David Forman (<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1205408566312>)

1975

I'm doing something I very, very rarely do -- responding to an article without reading the entire thing.

It was hard enough, to be honest, to even scan it after seeing the teaser line claiming that neither movement would have to give up its theology or ritual practice. HUH??

But I know that headlines and teasers are meant to provoke you into reading. So I read. Or I started. I got as far as the rhetorical question about whether a particular Conservative rabbi REALLY thinks congregants don't drive on Shabbat and the photo of k'ri'at megillat Ester at Kol Haneshamah in Jerusalem (I assume), and gave up.

Look. All this proves to me is that just as many Reform Jews (and, unfortunately, lay leaders and clergy) are as fuzzy on their own movement's ideology and theology as Conservative Jews (ditto).

The streams of contemporary Judaism are NOT a continuum. Yes -- I understand that they are perceived that way popularly, but folks like us are supposed to know better. I want to scream every time I hear someone in a position of authority or leadership in the Conservative movement talk about "fuzzy middle" or describes Conservative Judaism as "not Orthodox and not Reform."

For the love of dog, ya'll -- that's like saying a door is "not a floor and not a ceiling." It's no definition at all -- and it's wildly inaccurate in even giving you a hint of what the thing IS.

Thank God, there are real and definable ideological and theological differences between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism. When a Conservative Jew describes him/herself as "more Orthodox" or "more Conservative", it's like he/she is saying a door is "more floor-like" or "more ceiling-like." And we -- we, of all people -- should be the first to disabuse him/her of the misconception.

If you have a hard time making the clear distinction between the major streams of contemporary American Judaism, it's time to bone up. There's plenty of cross-fertilization -- again, thank God that we can learn and benefit from each other -- but there are distinct differences which define their respective boundaries.

To replay my favorite litany, we need to articulate the boundaries and vision of our own movement clearly, and stop worrying about how much like or unlike any other movement we may appear to be.

Bididut,
Rabbi David Kay