

Changes to Evening Service Times at Congregation Beth Shalom

by Rabbi Seth Adelson

As Jews, one of our most commonly-practiced *mitzvot* (obligations) is that of daily *tefillah* (prayer). This is a rabbinic commandment, that is, not explicitly from the Torah, but extrapolated in rabbinic literature from Scriptural sources. It is understood as being derived from (a) worship in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem (daily *tefillah* replaces the daily sacrifices of morning and afternoon), (b) the obligation to recite the words of the *Shema* evening and morning (as stated in the first paragraph in the Shema), and (c) from a *midrash* which suggests that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob prayed in the morning, afternoon and evening, and hence we too should offer *shaharit*, *minhah*, and *ma'ariv*.

Although the concept of *minyan*, a prayer quorum of ten Jews, is also a rabbinic formulation, it is understood that thrice-daily prayer is incumbent upon all Jews whether they can assemble a *minyan* or not at the appropriate times. Although there is no halakhic requirement that one must recite these *tefillot* in the company of ten people, there is an understanding that if one can pray with a *minyan*, he or she should do so, and not separate oneself from the community. In addition, while one can fulfill the *mitzvah* of daily *tefillah* by oneself, certain prayers may only be recited in the context of *minyan*.

One of the primary offerings of a synagogue is that forum for daily *tefillah* in the context of *minyan*; synagogues bring people together for many purposes, including *tefillah*. To that end, Congregation Beth Shalom has historically offered *shaharit*, *minhah*, and *ma'ariv* at appropriate times. These are the traditional times for these services:

- *Shaharit* may be recited from sunrise until the end of the first third of the day (that is, one-third of the total time of daylight; *Shema* must be recited before the end of the first quarter of the day).
- It is generally accepted that *minhah* may be recited until sunset (although some traditional opinions say it must be recited somewhat earlier. It may not, however, be recited after sunset).

- *Ma'ariv* is traditionally recited any time after sunset, but may be recited earlier (i.e. in daylight) provided (a) one recites Shema again after dark, and (b) this may not happen on a Saturday evening or at the end of a *Yom Tov* (holiday), because one cannot “borrow” time from a holy day to add to an ordinary day. Hence, *ma'ariv* must be recited after dark at the end of Shabbat or *Yom Tov*.

The foremost goals of a synagogue in offering these daily services are to (a) help members observe these *mitzvot* and (b) give opportunities for prayer and reflection, which are valuable and healthy pursuits, on a daily basis. A secondary goal is to offer the opportunity to mourn deceased loved ones through the recitation of *Kaddish Yatom*, literally the “orphan’s sanctification,” which is best known as the “Mourner’s Kaddish.” The Kaddish is one of the set of prayers which may only be recited in the context of *minyan*. It is worth noting, however, that while the recitation of *Kaddish Yatom*, as with virtually every other mourning ritual, is a *minhag* (custom), the daily recitation of *tefillah* is a *mitzvah*, an obligation, and therefore a much higher level of requirement according to Jewish law.

Sunset times in the Pittsburgh area vary from 4:53 PM in December until 8:54 PM in June. That means that in order to complete the recitation of *minhah* by sunset in December, that service must begin at about 4:35 PM, and that the *minhah* service during the four months between the clock changes in November and March (i.e. during the period of Standard Time) therefore must begin before 6:00 PM, and sometimes significantly so. (*Ma'ariv* is traditionally recited at Beth Shalom immediately after *minhah*.)

The challenges posed by maintaining this time structure are as follows:

- Since most of the adult members of our congregation work regular hours, it is a hardship to arrive in time for *minhah* during the winter months, and therefore it is difficult to assemble a *minyan*.
- Many in the congregation have become accustomed to thinking that daily services are only a vehicle for the recitation of Kaddish, and hence will only attend when they are “required” to do so.
- While daily services were at one time felt to be an obligation for many Jews, the percentage of Jews who include this ritual as a high priority in their daily routine has become quite small.

What happens, then, particularly during these winter months, is that insufficient numbers attend, causing the following problems:

- Jewish employees in the building are asked to attend the service to help complete the *minyan*. This is unfair because (a) it takes them away from the work for which they are paid, and (b) asks them to stay late when their working hours are finished.
- Attendees will make phone calls to try to complete the *minyan*, usually with limited success.
- Occasionally it happens that a *minyan* cannot be completed, and thus those who have the expectation of *minyan* are disappointed and frustrated with the congregation.

Furthermore, the practice during the rest of the year has been to hold the evening service at 7:00 PM. While this time may be easier for those who return later from work, it is problematic because (a) those who come home earlier are not necessarily inclined to step out again later to go to synagogue, and (b) on Friday evening, this time is particularly late for families who wish to have Shabbat dinner at a reasonable hour before the childrens' bedtime.

Given these considerations, the Religious Services Committee has decided to make the following changes:

1. Weekday evening services will be held year-round at 7:00 PM, Sunday through Thursday (Saturday night must still function at the traditional time due to halakhic considerations related to the sanctity of that day). This means that between the clock changes of November and March, the *minhab* service will not be recited, since it is too late.

Having the evening service at a fixed time (as with the morning service) is a standard practice in many synagogues (Conservative and otherwise). There are no halakhic issues in doing so.

2. During the winter months, when the evening service falls after dark, a "nod" to *minhab* will be accomplished by adding the "*Shir Shel Yom*" (Psalm of the Day),

followed by the *Kaddish*, before proceeding to *ma'ariv*. This will enable those for whom it is important to include the *Kaddish* before *ma'ariv* to do so.

3. Friday evening services will be held at 6:00 PM. This time is late enough that people can arrive after work, but still early enough that families can get to Shabbat dinner at 7:00 PM, allowing enough time for adequate celebration of Shabbat before younger children must be put to sleep.
4. *Minyan* attendance will be strengthened through a series of efforts, including having a “captain” for every evening and soliciting regular attendees in advance, rather than on the fly. We hope that you will consider volunteering to attend on a regular basis (e.g. every Tuesday evening or alternate Thursdays).

I hope that instituting these changes will make the evening *minyan* more accessible to all, and to highlight its importance as a standard, daily obligation for all Jews. It will reinforce the importance of *minyan* to us as a community by increasing the likelihood that people can come, and will have the added benefit of reducing confusion over service times.