

Illustrations of possible reconfiguration of seating in our main sanctuary:

See following pages for letter from Rabbi Greyber.



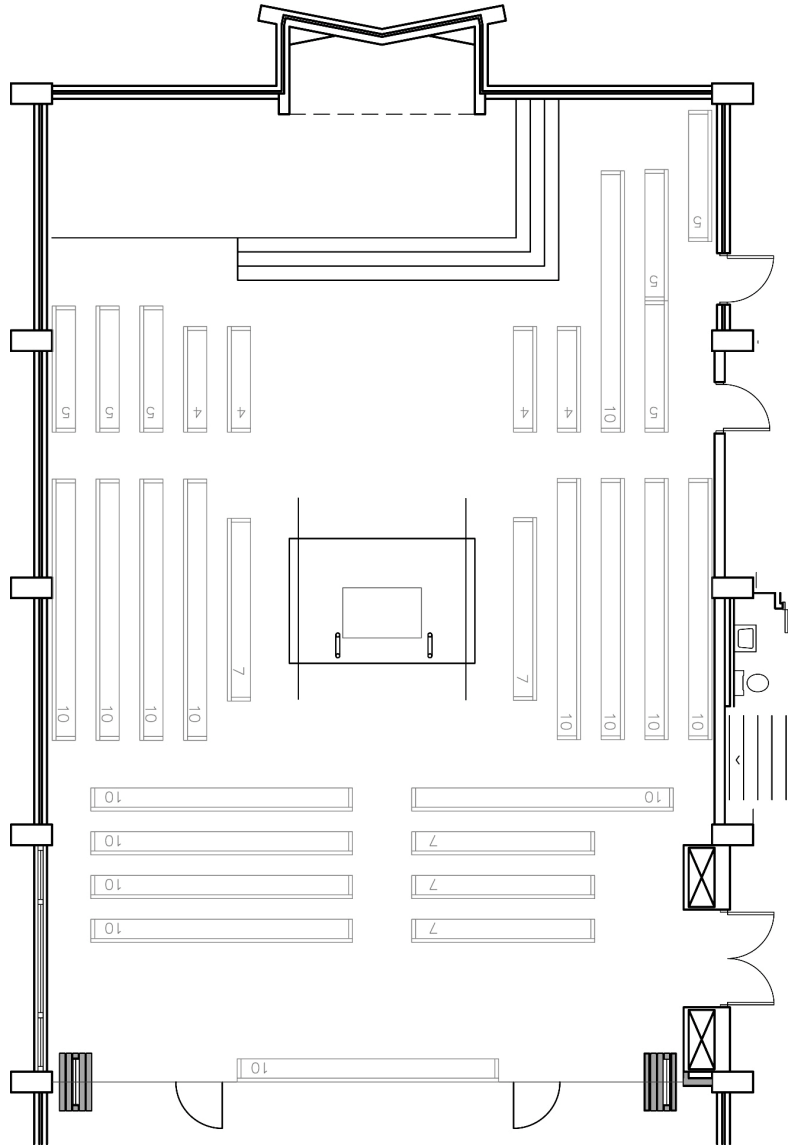
View from main entry ↑



View from left rear of sanctuary ↑



View from library door ↑



Chevre,

My parents took us to Yosemite National Park when I was 11 years old. We slept in the tent cabins in Curry Village. I tried, and failed, to complete the terrifying hike on the Mist Trail to Vernal Fall, so named because mist from the Fall coats the granite stairs of the trail on the 317 foot ascent. But what I remember most is waking up early while the campgrounds were still quiet, walking amidst the tall pine trees, and gazing for hours upon end as the light of the sun crept up the 4,000 foot granite cliffs that rose from the Valley floor. Although I didn't describe it this way then, it was during those solitary mornings that I experienced a sense of awe and, for the first time, God. I also learned: Space matters.

The sanctuary at Beth El is a holy space. Its *kedusha* (holiness) comes not from soaring granite walls, but from tears and songs, ancient prayers and genuine fellowship that seem to whisper a beautiful story through the seats and walls, through the Torah scrolls and siddurim. Part of its *kedusha* comes from the fact that, for many, it is familiar – there may be a particular section, or a particular view, or even a specific seat that we settle into from which we begin to pray. From my particular sanctuary seat for the past many months, I too have been developing a rich sense of memory, leading and participating in our *tefillot*, both bearing witness to, and experiencing, the strong sense of *kavannah* (intention) that drew me to Beth El not long ago. At the same time, perhaps because I am a relative newcomer, I also have been imagining our main sanctuary in different ways. “What would happen if these seats went there?” “What if the prayer leader stood here instead?” Those sorts of questions (and others) have been floating around in my mind; I have felt tempted to experiment. But changing a holy place should not be done lightly - space matters. People have deep, holy attachments to place – “that is where I said kaddish,” “my loved one would pray in that seat,” – I revere those deep connections and want to honor them. It is with that sense of love and honor for what we have, and curiosity for what might be, that I am writing to share what I've been imagining and a plan to test, and possibly implement, some of these ideas.

Change is Tradition

A friend reminded me that it is the act of changing itself that is old. When I talked about trying a different configuration in the Main Sanctuary with Rabbi Sager, he told me how in the year after he spent a sabbatical in Philadelphia (“was it 1989? Sibby would know...”), a portable stand was brought down from the bimah and placed on the floor; leading davening would take place from the floor, not from up on the bimah. Then, in the early 1990s, the riser upon which the Torah table now sits was built and the seats in the front of the sanctuary were moved out to the sides. Later Steve Herman built the beautiful table from which we now read the Torah. So, it seems, our tradition is to change — not to disrupt, but to deepen our experience of prayer again. The rabbis tell us, “*shinui makom, shinui mazel*” – “a change of place, a change of luck.” A change of *mazel* could be for better, or for worse. I am hopeful that we can explore how a change of place might again help our community to grow.

The Vision

Included along with this article is one vision, a sketch of a different way our sanctuary might be arranged using (nearly) the same pews we have now. Ideally a communal prayer space should reflect and complement the values of the praying community. What are those values? Participation. Inclusion. Shared conversation. In imagining our prayer space arranged as it is in the accompanying sketch, we can ask ourselves, “Does this arrangement embody our community's values?” Here are some reasons it might:

Participation, Not Performance – In an essay called, “The Vocation of the Cantor,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote¹,

“A Cantor who faces the holiness in the Ark rather than the curiosity of man will realize that his audience is God. He will learn to realize that his task is not to entertain but to represent the people Israel. He will be carried away into moments in which he will forget the world, ignore the congregation, and be overcome by the awareness of God in whose presence he stands. The congregation then will hear and sense that the Cantor is not giving a recital but worshipping God, that to pray does not mean to listen to a singer but to identify oneself with what is being proclaimed in their name.”

Few passages better articulate to me what it means to lead a community in prayer. Heschel gives voice to an ethic – prayer, not performance – that is already represented by so many of our prayer leaders whose melodies

¹ While Heschel's language does not reflect the egalitarian nature of Beth El, his ideas are nonetheless powerful.

are an invitation to join, not a demand to listen. Our current configuration – where the prayer leader faces the congregation, rather than the ark – seems to work against this ethic. By placing the prayer leader amidst the congregation and having her/him face towards the ark along with the rest of the community, both the prayer leader and the congregation can be reminded not to listen but to pray, not to watch but to participate in the holy task at hand.

Inclusion – Another benefit of this possible reorientation would be the introduction of several features that enable Beth El to better keep our commitment to making services at Beth El as accessible as possible.

Wheelchair Access – By moving the bimah and Torah reading table into the middle of the room and creating a space on the floor in front of the bimah, it will allow a space for building a ramp to allow wheelchair access to the bimah.

Sound – Such an orientation might allow more easily for the inclusion of a fixed microphone at the Torah table for use by service leaders and to amplify sound during the Torah reading on a regular basis. We could also investigate the possibilities of funneling the microphone sound directly into assisted hearing devices which can be made available at the sanctuary entrance, thus enabling the elderly and others with hearing impairments to better participate in Shabbat morning services. While Shabbat at Beth El does not currently include use of electronic devices, microphones are widely permitted in the Conservative movement. Use of a microphone, however, should be carefully considered so that it does not become a distraction.

Shared Conversation – Questions. Conversations. These are hallmarks of Beth El's service. The current configuration involves people "lobbing" questions to the bimah at the front of the room and the rabbi "volleying" answers back. Although our conversations are cordial, the configuration can seem, to some, to facilitate a confrontational back-and-forth dialogue rather than a shared conversation. The proposed new configuration might better reflect a view of Torah learning as a shared conversation. As a continuation of the process begun in 1989 by Rabbi Sager in bringing the Torah, the rabbi, and prayer leaders down from the bimah "on high" to the people, the configuration portrayed in the sketch would reflect a conviction that the Torah is the possession of the whole Jewish community, that God spoke to all the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, not just Moses or an exclusive elite.

Cost & Timing

David Klapper, the Chair of our Buildings & Grounds Committee, and I believe that a three step process can be implemented to allow us to test these ideas and to think about them as a possibility for our community. The first step in testing out these new ideas (Stage 1) can be implemented at virtually no cost. The Buildings & Grounds Committee can unscrew the existing pews and reconfigure them in a day – a good time to do this would be in late May after the last Bar/Bat Mitzvah of the spring. This arrangement could be in place for a few weeks allowing congregants to see it, try it out, and send email comments individually, or for comments to be collected via a survey. If these comments are mostly positive, then we could move forward with Stage 2 over the summer and invest some funds – a few thousand dollars from our capital fund – to make a few alterations to some of the current pews and to replace the carpet in the sanctuary so that it is ready for our next Bat Mitzvah in August.

For the last step (Stage 3) in the longer term, there are many members who have expressed interest in replacing the pews in our sanctuary, either with new pews or with nice sanctuary chairs that provide ongoing flexibility for how our prayer space is configured (to explore the world of synagogue furniture, look up "Kibbutz Lavi Furniture" on the web). Investing in new pews opens up a much larger array of possibilities in terms of how the sanctuary can be arranged and, when the time and finances are right, an in-depth process to explore even more configurations could be undertaken.

Why Not Face East?

As many of you know, our sanctuary faces South, not East towards Jerusalem, which would be ideal. The proposed configuration was put together with a wonderful architect named Tim Hoke who is familiar with Beth El's space from work he did on our remodel many years ago; Tim donated many hours of his time and expertise to help us come up with this plan and to create some tools to help us visualize what the space will look like when reconfigured (see first page for renderings). Although shifting to the East was explored, unfortunately, with the "givens" of our current space – the left side of the bimah cannot be lowered, the placement of our current ark, our current pews – the possibility of shifting the sanctuary to the East is not feasible at this time. Our current practice – of facing in the direction of the Torahs and the Ark during the Amidah – is correct according to Jewish law and should be continued until a larger reconfiguration is possible.

Decisions, Decisions

Change is hard; discussion is an integral part of it and often helps refine and improve ideas. During the winter, I shared some of these dreams and concepts in some small discussion settings – including with members of our Ritual Committee, our gabbaim, some of our service leaders, our Executive Committee to help arrive at the proposed configuration. In March, our Board began to discuss the proposed configuration. With the help of the Executive Committee and the Board, the following process has been developed for us to consider these changes:

March 14 Board Meeting – Proposed configuration was presented to the Board

Late March - Congregation receives communication via e-mail and as part of April bulletin.

Sunday April 1st (10:30 to 11:30am) and Tuesday evening, April 3rd (7:30 to 8:30pm) – Open community discussions at Beth El with a chance to “walk” the sanctuary and discuss the plan’s merits and challenges with the rabbi and others.

April 11 Board meeting - Board considers approval of trial period (Stage 1).

May 20 - June 10 – If the trial period is approved at April Board meeting, the proposed re-configuration takes place during the week of May 20th following the final bar/bat mitzvah of the Spring, and a 3-week trial period (Stage 1) ensues. Congregants can visit the reconfigured sanctuary through this period – on Shabbat and during the week. Feedback is sent via email to Executive Director, Laura Quigley at laura@betheldurham.org, via electronic survey, and/or given informally to members of the Board.

May 30th (Wednesday evening, 7:30 to 8:30pm) & June 10th (Sunday morning 9:30 to 10:30am) – additional opportunities to meet together, “walk” the sanctuary with Rabbi Greyber and other members, and to discuss the reconfiguration.

June 13 - Board Meeting during which Board considers decision regarding proceeding with Stage 2 over the summer. Stage 2 to be completed by early August, well-before Bat Mitzvah in mid-August and the commencement of the Fall season.

A Final Thought

Space matters. Nachmanides (Spain, 1194 – 1270) writes that after the epiphany at Mt. Sinai, God commanded us to build the Tabernacle as a way of taking that great experience of God with us into the wilderness: “The purpose of the Tabernacle was to contain a place in which God’s glory rests.” I believe God’s glory has indeed rested in our humble home at 1004 Watts Street. It has done so because our tradition has been to change. As we contemplate change again, may God’s presence continue to visit and guide us along the way.

B’virkat Shalom,
Rabbi Daniel Greyber