

DO YOU BOW? DANCING TO THE IMAGE OF THE SABBATH QUEEN

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In this age of gender-based clashes and other types of conflict within traditional groups, I thought it might be useful to explore ways in which group members express dissonance without compromising group harmony. To do this I interviewed Friday night congregants at a Reform synagogue, whose "choreographed" welcome of the Sabbath Queen *stand-turn/turn-sit* is both an expression of seamless group conformity, and a vehicle for expressing nonconformity through optional, non-choreographed gestures, like bowing. To my surprise, I found these gestures were not only directed at, but were tailored to, each participant's imagined construct of who or what was being welcomed. Moreover, these images of "who or what" reflect distinct and often divisive ideologies and religious views, politicizing and informing such choreographic decisions as "to bow or not to bow." To understand how this activity serves the constitution of community, however, it is important to understand the broader context in which it takes place.

The group I studied belongs to one of two congregations that are geographically and economically juxtaposed at opposite ends of a midwestern university town. More than half of the town's 75,000 residents are affiliated with the university. Thirty thousand of them are students, but less than two thousand of these are Jewish, and only a fraction of Jewish students attend religious services at school. Those who do, worship at Hillel, a campus-based organization located in a modest Victorian house on affluent Greek Row.

A state highway cuts north and south through the middle of town, and the student congregation lies to the east of this "Great Divide." Permanent residents congregate to the west, in a small but stylish structure of glass and brick, set into the manicured landscape of upscale suburbia. Both congregations follow the Reform branch of Judaism, which is less restricted in its protocols than Orthodox or Conservative branches, and is

therefore better able to absorb congregants of highly disparate origins, lifestyles, levels of Jewish education, and styles of religious observance. While Reform Judaism ordains both male and female rabbis, this egalitarian spirit does not extend to paying women the same salaries as their male counterparts. [Editor's note: the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements in Judaism all ordain women rabbis.] The ongoing disparity creates a bargain option for small Jewish communities.

The west-side Reform congregation was first able to hire a rabbi, newly ordained, in the last decade of the 20th century. With a rabbinic presence able to preside over life-cycle events like weddings and *bar mitzvahs*, interest was drawn from surrounding areas and membership swelled to roughly two hundred in the early 1990s. Nearly all two hundred show up for the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, but only ten percent show up for Friday night services. The larger body of infrequent participants are known to the Friday night congregants as the "Twice a Year Jews," in contrast to themselves, whom they call the "Friday Night Regulars." But while the same group gathers every Friday night sometimes joined by visitors to the community, curious non-Jews, and a trickle of adult students who periodically come-and-go, the core group of Friday Night Regulars is not itself homogenous.

Their eclecticism is reflected in their age range, which spans infancy to old age, and in their Sabbath attire, which ranges all the way from fashionable haute couture to humble jeans and sneakers. Traditional *kipot* (skull caps) appear here and there on some men, women and children, but not on all, and not with uniform approval. One of the few things the members do hold in common is the same hometown, where all have come to be permanent residents, either by choice or by circumstance. But even here, in this bucolic locale, anti-Semitic literature is periodically circulated and the synagogue

has twice been the target of arson. The reality points to an almost global fact of Jewish life in the United States: Jewish safe-space is more likely to be felt in the company of other Jews, than in any other social or physical construct.

Therefore, unlike the transient students, who will form communities and make permanent homes elsewhere, the Friday Night Regulars must manage their differences in present company, here and now. Otherwise they must embark on "a disintegrating errand into the suburbs,"¹ which, in this case, means losing not only the social benefits of community, but also losing a unified front in a place, and at a time, that is not only ambivalent toward them as Jews, but is potentially unsafe for them as well. For this reason, their social cohesion is essential to the creation and continuity of a physical and spiritual safe-space. The group is an ideal subject for inquiry into how this cohesion is accomplished.

In Jewish tradition the weekly day of rest, the Sabbath (*Shabbat*), begins at sundown on Friday night, and lasts until sundown on Saturday. The Torah commands Jews to both "keep" and "remember" the Sabbath (Ex. 5:12; Deut. 20:8) because God rested on the seventh day after all the work of creation. It was once considered one of the most sacred of Jewish holidays, second only to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Among the non-Orthodox in modernity, however, only a small percentage of synagogue members meet weekly to formally welcome the Sabbath. It is the small group that does so in the permanent Westside congregation that informs this study.

We join them on a Friday night in spring, as the sun melts down behind the Great Divide. In the east, the Jews on Greek Row fall silent and gather to pray ironically as in days of old, among the Hellenes. To the west, at an imprecise moment loosely linked to who is still talking in the hall, how many children have dropped their song sheets, and whose baby is still crying, a hush comes over the Friday Night Regulars, and the Sabbath descends on both sides of town.

The order of prayer has been continuously modified over the three thousand years that Jews have gathered to pray. Psalms and poems germane to the Sabbath have been added, changed, or deleted, just as synagogue architecture has been modified depending on the community tradition. The readers' podium can be in the center, as in Sephardic tradition, or by the alcove and the *aron* (cupboard holding the scrolls of the Torah). In the

western congregation, both their physical and spiritual orientation point in the same direction: toward their rabbi, their sacred text, and toward Jerusalem, the spiritual center of Judaism. The Sabbath service includes joint and tandem expressions of praise of God, meditation, comfort to mourners, and the congregants' consideration of a topical sermon. At the recitation or singing of certain important prayers, the congregation rises together, standing in place. When completed, the rabbi instructs them to sit. But at some point, usually right before *kaddish* (the mourner's prayer), there is an intentionally joyful hiatus.² The congregants begin a ritual departing from the directional orientation toward the rabbi and end with an abrupt return to it. The enactment is one of welcome, addressed to the Sabbath as if it is a personification of *Shabbat HaMalke*, the Sacred Feminine known in English as the "Sabbath Queen" or "Bride."

To greet the Queen, the Westside congregation rises, sings several stanzas of the prescribed welcoming hymn, *Lekhab Dodi* (Come My Beloved), and on the sixth verse do an about-face turn to the sanctuary doors that were formerly behind them. While facing the doors many of them bow, or make other gestures of welcome, as they continue to sing. On the last verse they turn back around, and when the singing ends, they sit down. The hymn is sung in Hebrew though the congregants do not understand Hebrew. The prayer text is printed in transliterated Hebrew as in the song title above and is actually a recitation of nonsense syllables to those praying. There is an English translation in the back of the book, but finding it is not part of the service. Moreover, the English translation loses the charm of intricate Hebrew wordplay, as well as deeply esoteric meanings of *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism) worked into the text by the 16th century author, Solomon ha-Levi Alkabetz.

Alkabetz was the rabbi of the town of Safed in northern Israel, a kabbalistic stronghold. On Friday nights, his congregation, probably all male and dressed in white as if going to a wedding, went out into the fields near Safed singing the rabbi's hymn.³ They developed a ritual to greet the Sabbath, meant to effect harmony in the cosmos. The ritual was also meant to affect a sexual union between the estranged male and female aspects of the mystical godhead, *Eyn Sof* ("Without End" is another name of God). This concept does not appear in the Torah, but is often alluded to in kabbalistic

interpretations. Since most of the Friday Night Regulars are neither familiar with mystical Kabbalah, nor with the song's meanings, I have excluded the singing from my study of their ritual. I have focused exclusively on their non-verbal communication, specifically while they are facing away from the rabbi, when a number of them bow in the direction they are facing, or make other idiosyncratic gestures.



"I see a dark shadow, smudging sacred space . . . I dip into the space She makes sacred." Drawing by Judith S. Neulander.

Although participants describe this behavior as "welcoming the Sabbath Queen," I frame it as "dance" according to Gregory Bateson's use of "frame," meaning the choreographed context in which non-verbal communication can be understood.⁴ In addition, I conceptualize the ritual as a "dance event" according to Ruth Stone's description of dance events as choreographed performances that occur in temporally and spatially

bounded contexts.⁵ My analytic approach follows Jane Cowan's example by reading bodies as "signs" of the meanings embedded in dancing.⁶

No one is required to participate in any part of the Jewish service, and there are no penalties associated with not participating. The elderly or infirm often sit through parts of the service that are done standing, for example, and such decisions are considered unremarkable. Therefore, congregants who rise to join the performance are focused on others similarly involved in the welcome, not on those who sit out the dance. The congregants as performers evaluate other performers, modify their own performances, note innovations, and take cues, all of which is done by watching. Moreover, the way that people watch each other can itself be a means of expressing either cohesion or conflict within the community.

One of the congregants, a Friday Night Regular named Fred, helps illustrate this point. Fred and I had been at odds for some time when I approached him, and he was reluctant to be interviewed. His answers struck me as terse and uncommunicative:

JSN: What are you welcoming that wasn't there before?

Fred: Nothing.

JSN: Why do we stand?

Fred: You stand to greet a senior person.

JSN: Why do we turn around?

Fred: Because the rabbi says to turn around.

But Fred's discussion became animated on the subject of bowing, changing the topic to *unseen* watching—of *me*, it turns out—something I had not anticipated, in this, or any other connection. Moreover, it seemed to me from his manner of expression that he was not only telling me about his welcoming ritual, but also about his power as a voyeur, over which I have no control. In response to my question "Do you bow?" Fred answered: "when I turn around I watch *you*. When I see *you* do it, that's how I know when to bow." Given our contentious exchange, I may be over interpreting his response. But whatever his intent, the incident has important implications in terms of people involved in self-conscious public display. This may be particularly true in situations where it is understood that one will both see and be seen, but where prayer rather than the individual is the intended focus of attention, and looking at others is integral, however auxiliary, to the task at hand. Intention (*Kavanah* in

Hebrew) is an essential ingredient in Jewish prayer to discourage praying by rote. The power of intention when looking is an almost global preoccupation at the folk level, as evidenced in widespread methods to avert an "evil" or ill-intentioned eye. Therefore, it is interesting that protocols for disturbing a person at prayer, and for securing physical distance between persons at prayer, are set forth in the Talmud.

In the Tractate *Berakhot* ("Blessings"),⁷ rabbis discuss civil-religious rights against invasion of concentration in prayer, or invasion of individual prayer space. After my interview with Fred, my sense of being "watched behind my back" whether or not I actually was, made it clear to me that one's prayer space can be easily violated, if one becomes the knowing subject of surveillance while praying. When such a violation occurs, it distracts both the watcher, and the person being watched, from concentration at prayer. In this sense, both are "out of step" with the rest of the congregation. They no longer share the same preoccupation, and are no longer part of the commonality that is being enacted by the group. Since there is no recourse against surveillance as claimed by Fred, the practice or even the claim can be an abuse of power, as well as a violation of Talmudic imperative, enacted in this case through the vehicle of welcoming the Sabbath Queen. But according to Fred, even he relinquishes personal animus in favor of communal aspiration, when he allows himself to be caught up in the dance. "Once I get in the action" he assured me, "I don't think of who is being watched, or who is watching, anymore." Through this example, we can see how personal conflicts and other divisive issues can be *played with*, as the dance is played out, though not always with words.

As a participant-observer, I became aware that most congregants who bowed, or made other innovative welcoming gestures, were using carefully structured and highly imaginative means to both express and transcend their individual differences. Notably, their choreographic choices were not always aesthetic, but these choices were always ideological, seeming to reflect in each individual's style of prayer the same principles upheld in their professional lifestyles.

For example, Edith is a divorce attorney; a feminist who sees the Queen as "a dark shadow, smudging sacred space." She expresses herself in legal terms, bowing, she says, to "nullify" the prayer still held in Orthodox tradition that thanks God for

not being a woman. Edith's personalized welcome seems to revive a beleaguered feminist spirit by immersion into sacred feminine space, suggesting baptismal rebirth in her choice of the word "dip" since one does not "bow" into water: "When I dip into the space the Queen makes sacred, I'm thanking God for being a woman . . . and I feel restored." Conversely, Dan is a therapist who specializes in marriage counseling. He describes the Queen as "radiance, like a bride—something pure and holy in the bride with the pure, white flowing dress." His welcome of the Sabbath Queen invokes Kabbalist metaphors that attend traditional female roles, brides and wedding nights. Dan foregoes a bow, and invents instead "a small welcoming gesture with my hand," referring to a physically small, but sexually large enactment, where his right hand is clawed and his erect forearm is jerked back and forth close to his chest. He explains, reflecting the Kabbalist imagery: "It's sort of God, the Sabbath and the Jewish people all coming together."

Whether or not they are conscious of it, Edith and Dan are equally following the spirit of Safed in their attempts to recover, reunite, or otherwise restore the world to better balance, or greater harmony, through their welcoming rituals. This holds true for both, even though their notions of a greater harmony are as ideologically opposed as are Edith's efforts to provide, and Dan's efforts to prevent, the dissolution of difficult marriages—or for that matter, as are their polarized black-and-white images of "shadow" and "radiance" in configuring the Sabbath Queen. Nevertheless, on Friday nights they greet the Sabbath in the same company, and welcoming the Queen is spiritually uplifting for both. But this is not true of all who stand and join the dance, as we are about to see.

Gary is a political scientist who does not envision the Sabbath Queen, and for him, joining the dance is actually discomfiting. He explains, "Basically, okay—I don't welcome the Sabbath Queen, and I do it because everyone else is doing it. It's a very awkward moment for me . . . I don't bow, because I don't believe in bowing to anything. I'm very self-conscious about this. If you watched me at this, you'd see how I make a sort of—pathetic, conformist gesture . . . I do it because I feel like I'm participating in a tradition that has social and moral, as well as theological importance. It's also a way of me feeling some connection with my family and past generations."

In considering Gary's response, it is useful to recall that sitting out the dance is always an option, to say nothing of staying home like ninety percent of the congregation. Therefore, Gary's choice to participate, even when it is discomfoting, should not be hastily dismissed as ethically unprincipled, or spiritually impoverished. As Roy Rappaport says in his study of ritual: "Belief is an inward state, knowable subjectively if at all. Acceptance, in contrast, is a public act visible to both witnesses and the performers themselves. Acceptance is thus a fundamental social act forming the basis for public social orders as unknowable and volatile belief cannot."⁸



"I see radiance, like a bride . . . I make a small welcoming gesture with my hand . . ." Drawing by Judith S. Neulander

Rappaport's thinking suggests that to visibly stand with the group is to stand and be publicly counted—not only numerically, but also ideologically—as in taking a moral stance, or "standing up for" something. In Gary's case, the "social and moral, as well as theological, importance" of the community take precedence even when the vehicle for expressing that

commitment is personally discomfoting. "In sum," as Rappaport says "ritual *embodies* social contract. As such it is the fundamental social act upon which . . . society is founded."⁹ Therefore, to participate in the ritual is to subscribe to the social contract, helping form in that act both the substance of the community and the bulwark of its endurance, whether or not one believes in the particular narrative that informs the ritualized action. As in Gary's case, secular acceptance of or conformity with the ritual, can represent a felt connection and commitment to the community—past, present and future—that is at least as deep and as principled as that of any staunch believer in the Sabbath Queen. Hence, when the congregation rises to welcome the Sabbath Queen, and the political scientist also rises, to *not* welcome the Sabbath Queen, his dancing body becomes a *political* emblem, standing not only for, but *as*, what Jameson calls "a symbolic affirmation of a specific historical class of collective unity."¹⁰

It appears that for the Westside congregation, social cohesion is made possible when rituals provide boundaries of protocol, within which risks of exposure and innovation may be safely taken. This is particularly true in the context of dance since risk is particularly high when the body is on display, precisely because the exposed body is open to criticism and to potential humiliations or abuses of power. I use the term "exposed" as suggested by Suzanne, a college freshman home for Spring Break, whose parents are Friday Night Regulars. When asked "why do we turn?" she described the exposed body as a sign of trust, saying, "We turn because symbolically, it's a change in action to create a *re*-action. You turn to expose yourself to the Sacred. The front of you is the most vulnerable; you're exposing all your vital organs. It's a gesture of trust."

We might add that in any public arena, exposing one's back to symbolic or real forms of social or spiritual sabotage is similarly a gesture of trust. Suzanne's response suggests that to stand "exposed" at the juncture of the sacred and the mundane and to experience safety in both realms—before God and community—is to acquire a sense of spiritual and communal safe-space that is not only intellectual but also visceral, and therefore profound.

Based on this study, it appears that ideologically divided groups can cohere as communities, if and when individual expressiveness can be trusted to occur in ways that do not threaten collective unity, while the individual can equally trust collective

behaviors to occur in ways that will not threaten individual expressiveness. From a structural point of view, as long as individualized "dance steps" do not break the shared choreographic pattern--no matter how distinctive or contentious they may be--they do not disrupt the "danceline." Moreover, to the extent that trust is not violated, either by an individual or by the collective, the dance transcends the singularity of a ritual welcome. It simultaneously embodies the individual's accountability to the community and, in return, the community's accountability to the individual. In this specifically non-verbal interaction, the Friday Night Regulars demonstrate the power of dance to "make real" a transcendent moment when differences cease to matter and when individuality can be fully expressed without threatening collective unity. In this sense, the dance event, composed of bodies making individual gestures within the boundaries of collective unison, forms an ideal image of communal harmony.

Upon reflection, the constitution of community is both an illusion and a reality for the Westside congregation. In reality they share far less commonality than they imagine, and effectively, they lack religious safe-space even in their own synagogue. But *affectively*, they dance the only strength they really have: accountability to each other. And in so doing, they make community real.

Notes

1. Deborah Dash Moore, "The Constitution of Community: Jewish Migration and Ethnicity in the United States," in Moses Rischin, ed., *The Jews of North America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), pp. 105-106.
2. Evelyn Garfiel, *Service of the Heart: A Guide to the Jewish Prayer Book* (North Hollywood: Wilshire Book Company, 1987), p. 133.
3. David Ariel, *The Mystic Quest: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1988), p. 104.
4. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 178.
5. Ruth M. Stone, *Let the Inside be Sweet: The Interpretation of Music Event Among the Kpelle of Liberia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 2.

6. Jane K. Cowan, *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 24.

7. *Berakhot* 5.31b: 193.

8. Roy A. Rappaport, "Ritual," in *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook*, ed. Richard Bauman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 253.

9. *Ibid*, p. 254.

10. Frederick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 291.

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