

congregation melodies and musical contributions that they had learned in summer camp or at other congregations. These members would often share their talents with the congregation in the context of a worship service. Beyond the aesthetic contribution, it began to send the message that the *bima* (ritual center stage in a sanctuary) was not the exclusive province of professional clergy.

Not everyone was thrilled with the innovations of the new rabbi. In particular, as Kushner pushed for higher levels of individual involvement, some members balked. Three years after his arrival, Kushner won renewal of his contract by a single vote. In the shakeout over the direction of the growing congregation, the dissenters left to form a second temple in Sudbury. But as is so often the case after a controversy, the departure of the most strident dissenters led to a period of unparalleled creativity and a project that would bring Beth El national attention.

The spirit that Larry Kushner brought to Beth El, especially in the realm of prayer and devotion, was hardly the kind of worship service that was standard in the Reform movement. Thus it was no surprise that the members found the Union Prayer Book, the UAHC-issued standard, wanting in many respects. A much better reflection of the spiritual impulses of the community were the prayer books that bar and bat mitzvah families would occasionally customize for their service. Larry Kushner's great interest in prayer led to his teaching of a course on liturgy for several years. Members of the class, challenged by the course and noting the gap between the forms of prayer that they desired and the Union Prayer Book, decided to create their own prayer book. Ironically, although Kushner's class and the style of worship that he introduced to Beth El gave impetus to the creation of this prayer book committee, it was hardly his idea. In fact, Kushner had proposed that the congregation adopt the traditional prayer book of David de Sola Pool, a book that is mostly used in Orthodox synagogues. The members of Beth El, however, had other ideas.

Thirty of them began work on the new prayer book, which eventually was published in 1975 under the title *Vetaher Libenu* ("Purify Our Hearts"), edited by Nancy and Peter Gossels. Five years later, *Vetaher Libenu II* was issued. Edited by Nancy Gossels and Joan Kaye, it was more notable than its predecessor in one significant way. The editorial committee had decided that the exclusive male imagery used to describe God in the traditional liturgy was unacceptable. It led, they felt, to a form of idolatry. Their solution was to retain the traditional Hebrew language, though they added the names of the four matriarchs to the three patriarchs in the *Amidah* (standing prayer). At the same time, the English translation alternated the pronouns *He* and *She* when referring to God. It

also avoided the use of the medieval metaphor of God as King. The standard translation of the blessing formula was changed from "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe" to "Holy One of Blessing, Your Presence fills Creation."

The new prayer book was hailed as the first nonsexist prayer book in Jewish history. Beth El's office fielded requests from all over the world for copies of the privately printed book. Of course *Vetaher Libenu II* also became the *siddur* (prayer book) for the congregation. But perhaps the most remarkable part of the creation of the prayer book was the fact that the rabbi was not part of the committee that created it.

The Right Place

When my husband, Peter, and I were "temple-shopping" seventeen years ago, we happened to attend High Holyday services at Congregation Beth El. There we heard for the first time the words of a young, dynamic rabbi and prayed from a loose-leaf *machzor* that had been written by members of the congregation. We knew we had come to the right place.

It was a far cry from the source of my own Jewish roots: a small, blue-collar mill town in northeastern Connecticut where a handful of Jews maintained an Orthodox *shul* yet could afford neither a rabbi nor a religious school. I came to Beth El with no formal Jewish education but with a deep sense of Jewish identity, which I attribute with love to my parents.

Though I blush to admit it, my knowledge of Judaism was so minimal that during one of my first encounters with Rabbi Kushner, I interrupted a discourse on the Torah to ask him what exactly the Torah was. (He teased me about that for a long time!)

I'm not sure whether it was because of the ingenuousness of that question or some deeper, mystical insight, but some time later the rabbi suggested that I consider joining the Ritual Committee. I was stunned. Never mind that I had never studied Torah or that I couldn't tell an *aleph* from a *bet*; I knew almost nothing about a prayer service. (I would soon learn that at Beth El there are no prerequisites, or even limits, to what you may do as long as you are willing to study, to learn, and to labor to reach your goal.)

In the early spring of 1980, a committee that had been working for nine months to revise and expand the first edition of our *shabbat siddur* met and listened to coeditor Joan Kaye read an article that suggested that using masculine metaphors alone to describe God was

idolatrous. The same committee had earlier rejected a proposal to do an entirely nonsexist *siddur* because it seemed more politically fashionable than theologically sound at the time. Now came the realization that such exclusive use of male imagery was unacceptable on theological grounds!

By evening's end, Joan, Peter, and I, along with committee members Bill Adelson, Mark Bloomberg, Adeane Bregman, Aleta Cane, and Gerry Dicker, agreed that we would have to re-edit the entire *siddur*. Not only would we have to change not only the masculine and feudal epithets for God, but we would also have to find language that would reestablish the dignity of women and have meaning for our children as well. It was an overwhelming and frightening moment. But it was also exhilarating. For where else but at Beth El could a group of laypeople assume such an awesome responsibility? We had made a momentous decision without congregational or rabbinic approval. Yet in our hearts, we had made the only decision we could make.

The birth of *Vetaher Libenu II* six months later turned out to be a historic event: the first nonsexist *siddur* ever published. It received publicity all over the country. Its appearance was even noted on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*! Most important, the congregation welcomed it warmly. Eight years later, *Vetaher Libenu* is in its sixth printing, and thousands of copies have been sold worldwide to Christians as well as Jews.

For Beth El is the kind of place where such growth is possible, a place that challenges our minds and hearts while it encourages, nurtures, and supports great dreams of daring.

It is indeed the right place.

[Nancy Gossels's recollection excerpted from *The First Twenty-Five Years: Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley*, Congregation Beth El, p. 68.]

o

Even though Larry Kushner to this day thinks that the *Vetaher Libenu* writers might have done even better if they'd had extensive exposure to more traditional prayer books, he is staunchly proud of what his members created. He deliberately kept his distance from the prayer book projects. When presented with drafts of sections that included questions of taking one direction or the other, he would offer his opinion and then say, "Whatever you do will be fine."

This is perhaps the best example of what Larry Kushner brought to Beth El: empowerment of his congregants. Kushner's rabbinate has been