

On

## **Erev Shabbat Services**

In the Jewish faith, the day of rest - *Shabbat* – falls on Saturday. It begins at sundown on Friday evening and ends when three stars can be seen in the sky on Saturday night. “Keeping” (observing) *Shabbat* is a central part of the faith - commanded by God.

A quote meaningful to us reads, “More than the Jews have kept *Shabbat*, *Shabbat* has kept the Jews.” (Ahad Ha’am, 1856-1927) Creating that quiet space in a busy modern life – to disconnect from the rat race, reflect, be grateful, connect with family and friends – it’s what so many of us need more of in our lives. It’s “Self-Care” from ancient times!

NVHC offers Friday Erev Shabbat (evening) services to “kick off” *Shabbat*. While the format can take many forms – especially in a creative, reform congregation! – services typically follow the same flow:

### **Part 1 - Kabbalat Shabbat - Welcoming Shabbat**

The first part of service is meant to be warm and welcoming - a joyous invitation. Two candles are lit with a blessing to signify the start of *Shabbat*. The candles symbolize the two commandments from Torah about *Shabbat* to *shamor* (observe) and *zachor* (remember). Sometimes you’ll see congregants cover their eyes as the candles are being lit, to prevent “benefitting” from the candlelight before the blessing is complete.

The congregation will sing a number of Psalms and poems which are meant to help us experience the week of Creation as God did, coming ourselves once again to a day of rest. This may include *L’cha Dodi*, whose lyrics use the metaphor of a wedding to invoke the reverence, excitement, and joy of Shabbat. The words remind us to wake up and shake off the troubles of the week. During the last verse, all stand to face the sanctuary doors, bowing and welcoming the “Sabbath Bride.”

### **Part 2 - Sh’ma & Its Blessings**

The *Sh’ma* is a beautiful, two-line prayer that serves as an affirmation of the Jewish belief in one God. The first line of the *Sh’ma* is sung aloud - a belief in one God. The second line - about the majesty of God - is sung in a whisper. Some say it’s a reminder that, during the Byzantine

Empire, saying this prayer was forbidden and could get you killed. Others say that Moses stole this line of prayer from the angels, so it's whispered to acknowledge our mortal frailty.

The two prayers before the *Sh'ma* focus on how God created the Earth and taught right from wrong. Two prayers then follow, with themes of redemption and protection. (Fun Fact: Only the evening *Shabbat* service has the last protection prayer - dating back to when early worshippers had to walk home after services in the dark and darkness was fearful and dangerous.)

### **Part 3 - Amidah - Speaking with God**

Historically, this portion of the service took place as people entered the temple, to be in God's presence to offer sacrifices and prayers directly to him. After the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, our sages transformed sacrifice into words of prayer, creating what's been beautifully described as a "sacrifice of words."

First, congregants face the ark and sing the prayer *Adonai S'fatai*, asking God to "open up my lips so that my mouth may declare your praise."

The *Amidah* ("The Standing Prayer") then begins as if one is entering a throne room - bowing in supplication and praising God's power and holiness. The center of the prayer asks God for a peaceful Shabbat - day of rest. The prayer ends as if one is leaving a throne room - more bowing, praise, thanks, and wishes of peace.

While in God's presence, the community also prays for healing. The clergy will read the names of people in the community who are sick and hurting (some in English, some in Hebrew). They'll ask the congregation for any other names to be added before *Mi Shebeirach* ("Prayers for Healing") is sung. Feel free to add the name of someone that you're thinking of.

Our \*favorite\* NVHC tradition often occurs here, too - *Shehecheyanu* ("Blessings")! Members are invited to share happy moments from their week aloud with the community. (You'd better believe Jack will mention his *Bar Mitzvah*.) Judaism is way ahead of the curve on practicing gratitude...

At the end of this part of the service, one of our clergy may offer a moment of quiet reflection for personal prayer with God. Reflect on connections made during the service, think about your past week's wins and losses, set an intention for your coming week, peruse the siddur for interesting commentary - whatever you want to use this time for. It's yours.

## Part 4 - Conclusion

The service closes with the same idea of *shamor* (observe) and *zachor* (remember). Clergy recites the names of those who have died within the last month (*sh'loshim*) or because it is the yearly anniversary of their death (*yahrzeit*). Those who are in mourning or observing a *yahrzeit* are asked to rise when the name of their loved one is read, so that the congregation can support them in their mourning, reciting the *Kaddish* ("The Mourner's Prayer") together.

Next is the *Kiddush* ("Blessing of *Shabbat* Holiness"), using wine for sanctification to proclaim the holiness of *Shabbat*, and *HaMotzi* ("Blessing for Sustenance"), said using *Challah*. The *challah* is a ceremonial bread, eaten on *Shabbat* and Festivals. Historically, two loaves are used Friday night, symbol of the double portion of manna God sent to the Israelites in the wilderness each Friday, so that they did not have to work to gather food during *Shabbat*. It's also really good to have a loaf of bread ready and baked for the evening AND for the next day.)

Finally – the favorite part of kids young and old - *Oneg* ("Joy & Delight"). It's a time for sweet treats and socializing after services are complete. Think of it as the origin story of coffee and donuts in the church basement.

None of this is written in stone. One of the things we love about NVHC is how the clergy will weave in different readings, songs and prayers to best punctuate the theme of the week's Torah portion, a specific holiday or celebration, or current events. It makes Friday services relevant and reflective - and we hope you enjoy it with us.

### *Sources:*

YouTube: Erev *Shabbat* Service, 2/17/23, at NVHC

Course Materials, "Introduction to Judaism," Rabbi Susan Warshaw

Course Materials, "Parent B'nai Mitzvah Course," Judith Naiman

Websites: NVHC, Union for Reform Judaism, My Jewish Learning, Chabad