

Synaplex Shabbat – Your Invitation for Prime Time Yom Kippur

Rabbi Jason Miller

A story is told of a conversation between a Jewish man and his rabbi a few years ago. Goldstein called his Rabbi and said, “I know tomorrow is Yom Kippur, but there’s a college football game too. And it’s going to be a great game. Rabbi, I’m a life-long fan. I’ve got to watch my team’s game on TV.” The Rabbi responds, “Goldstein, that’s what VCRs and Tivo Recorders are for.” Goldstein is surprised. “You mean I can record Yom Kippur services, Rabbi?”

In our Torah reading today, we heard: “You stand here, all of you today, your elders and your children and the stranger in your midst... For this mitzvah is not too puzzling for you, nor too remote... Rather it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart—you can do it! Today I place before you life and death, both blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life that you and your children might live.”

I’d like to talk for a moment about what I learn from that statement from our Torah. And also what you can learn from that joke I opened with just a moment ago. Commentary on both the verse from the Torah and the joke will serve as a way to introduce you to our congregation’s Synaplex initiative for Shabbat enhancement.

Let me repeat that verse from the Torah: “You stand here, **all of you** today, **your elders and your children** and **the stranger** in your midst... For this mitzvah is **not too puzzling for you**, nor too remote... Rather it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart—you can do it! Today I place before you life and death, both blessing and curse. Therefore, **choose life** that **you and your children might live.**”

What have I learned from this section from the Torah and how does it apply to our congregation?

All of You, Elders and Children – We’re in this together. A member at our congregation is not designated by age. If you are 60-100 years old, you count and you matter. If you are 0-30 years old, you count and you matter. And if you are 31-59, you count and you matter. Will we have programs for all of those age groups? You bet we will. Shabbat will be our focus. Shabbat is “Jewish Prime Time” and on Shabbat it will be our goal, our mission, to have something for everyone. For the tots through the seniors.

Stranger in your midst – And not just for our members. Our doors are open. In order for us to survive as a congregation, we rely on our dues paying members – families and singles. But our doors are open to the stranger as well. We are a welcoming congregation that encourages the entire community to take advantage of our services and programs. Not a single person walked through our doors today having to present a ticket for entry. We want everyone to feel good about their Judaism. We encourage everyone to participate.

Not too puzzling – Something for everyone means you don’t have to speak Hebrew, have a mastery of the Talmud, or be able to know which page we’re on in the main service at all times. I believe there are different entry points to Judaism and to synagogue life.

Through Synaplex, we will offer many entry points. Some will be through prayer as we are a beit tefillah – a house of prayer. Some will be through study and scholarship as we are a beit midrash – a house of study. And some will be through social, cultural, and spiritual expressions of togetherness. As a beit kenesset – a house of communal gathering, we will offer options for using your head, heart, and hands. Opportunities for exercise of both body and mind, opportunities for social action and chesed work, opportunities to expand your relationship with both your friends and with God.

Choose – If you’ve always wished there were more options at shul to choose from, then I think you’ll really embrace Synaplex. In an effort to appeal to a wider range of individuals, there will often be more

than one program at once. I remember one Synaplex Shabbat at a congregation in Michigan, where I directed the Synaplex program, and a woman walked into the shul and looked at the large poster displaying the schedule for Shabbat morning. She looked very upset, and told me how horrible this was. I asked her what was so horrible. She told me that there looked to be too great programs scheduled on top of each other. She wanted to be in two places at once and attend both programs! I think that's a great thing to have to choose between two great programs at shul. Now, people tell me there's not enough choice.

You and Your Children May Live - Live! We want you to experience life and to have fun. Shul hasn't always been connected to fun and I'm well aware of this. But it can be. Shabbat is the day. This is the place. You are the players. We want you here. You'll want to be here. So that you and your children may live Jewishly.

Remember that joke I opened with? The one about the man who thought he could record Yom Kippur services. Well, I've been told that dissecting a joke inevitably makes it less funny, but I'm going to go on a limb here and try to make a point.

Here goes: That joke is not original. I borrowed it because I thought it's good and it works. I thought it was an appropriate joke.

If you read the recent article about our Synaplex program in the New Standard article, you know that the author stated that this is nothing new. Well, she was right. Synaplex isn't new. Other congregations around the country are doing it too. It works and therefore, we're going to participate. Part of the strength of the Synaplex program is that we have the ability to find out what the best practices are in Shabbat programming among the most dynamic North American congregations. Yes, shuls have been experimenting with ideas like Yoga and Learner's Services for years, but what Synaplex has done, is instruct congregations to do many of these great ideas all at once – on the same Shabbat. And some even at the same time. This gives our congregants what I like to call "Ultimate Choice."

The original joke, I believe, is about a New York Yankees baseball fan. I localized it to an OSU Buckeyes football fan. Why? Because it's important to custom fit to our needs and interests. We will do this with Synaplex. Just because something works well for a congregation in NY or LA or Chicago, doesn't mean it will work well for our shul. Maybe, however, with a little creativity, it can be tailored to work here, for our congregation.

That joke has also been around for a while. Of course, if you've heard it before, you know that originally the rabbi doesn't suggest both using a VCR to record it as well as a Tivo digital recorder. But I modernized it by bringing in the Tivo reference. I also maintained the traditional reference to a VCR. Synaplex is a modern idea, but it doesn't seek to replace what was already in place. I preserved the VCR reference in the joke. We will bring in new and modern ideas to the synagogue during Shabbat, but we will preserve what is already in place, specifically the traditional service.

Finally, Goldstein in the joke is saying something very important to his rabbi. I have other interests he says. I place value on other activities. The rabbi seems to acknowledge this. Congregants come to me all the time and recount the many activities, extracurricular interests, and responsibilities that keep them from having time to come to shul on Shabbat. And I acknowledge this. I understand this tension. The rabbi in the joke seems eager to suggest ways to accommodate. We will seek to do this with the Synaplex Shabbat program as well.

I want you to come to shul during Shabbat.

I want to see you more.

I know you're busy. I know your family is busy. Your kids are at school all week long; you're at work. You're shuttling them from activity to activity. You're trying to spend more time with them on the weekends. You're

trying to see your spouse. You're trying to maintain your relationships with your friends. You're your children's social coordinator and advisor too.

We are blessed that the STAR Foundation created Synaplex and then selected our shul as a Synaplex congregation this year. What is STAR? A Foundation made up of three prominent family foundations, the Schusterman, Steinhardt, and Bronfman family foundation have partnered to create STAR, Synagogue Transformation and Renewal. One of the main programs this foundation does is Synaplex, and it has been quite successful with it. They have helped Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox congregations make Jewish prime time even better with more programs, learning opportunities, and exciting events over the course of Shabbat.

You've already, hopefully, heard and read a little bit about Synaplex. But you may still be thinking, "What is it anyway?" Well, think of the image of a Cinema Plex – a movie theatre multiplex: If only Disney "PG-Rated" cartoons were being shown, the viewing audience would be limited. If only Adult feature "R-Rated" films were offered, it would also be a limited audience. We don't want a limited audience here.

The creative concept of the Cinema Plex came to remedy that situation and the outcome yielded packed houses at American Prime Time – each and every weekend. So too with Synagogue Plex – all 25 hours of Shabbat, from Kabbalat Shabbat – when we welcome in the Shabbat on Friday evening – through Saturday night's Havdallah and Melava Malka when we bitter-sweetly bid Shabbat farewell. This is Shabbat and it's "Jewish Prime Time"

We will be issuing free tickets of admission – "VIP Passes" – for a multiplicity of gateways, many portals into the Shabbat rhythm. We will seek to engage all ages and all configurations of Jewish families and singles. In contrast to a cinema plex, however, our Synaplex will blend our diverse paths, our many doors of entry, and our interests into a unified community – a *Kehilah Kedoshah* – each Shabbat.

When our shul community comes together on Tuesday, October 10th to formally quick off our 125th year as a congregation, our quasiquiscentennial, with our congregational wide sukkah party, we will announce some of the highlights of the first Synaplex program to be held later this month on Friday and Saturday, October 27 and 28. Some of the offerings will be programs you never thought we would do – like a special service where you will bring your pets to receive a blessing. Other offerings will be programs you always hoped we would do more of – like bring exciting speakers, host learning sessions, and have opportunities for our more mature congregants whose children are no longer in the house to have some time to learn and shmooze together.

Why were we selected for this program? In our application, we explained that we have a diverse membership. We are made up of about 450 membership units that include many empty-nesters and seniors, as well as older and younger non-married singles, young families, etc. We also run the gamut of in terms of ideology and religious observance. Some of our members are Shomer Shabbat, come to shul to learn and daven, and want to meet other like-minded families. Other members here are more liberal in their observance, come to shul looking more for the cultural and social, and may be looking for a community that addresses those needs and desires. Shabbat is already a special time here. The STAR Foundation believes that Synaplex can make it even more special, better attended, and livelier.

Today is Yom Kippur. It is known as Shabbat Shabbatot, "the Sabbath of Sabbaths." I want each Synaplex Shabbat to become the Sabbath of Sabbaths too, in terms of both attendance and excitement in the building.

There are over 1,000 people here in the sanctuary. If we can get 250 people to a Shabbat when there's no bar or bat mitzvah, that's a good number. But that also means that only about one-fourth of you will be here. So, look to your right and look to your left. Only one in four of the people you see will likely return to this congregation for Shabbat during the year. In fact, as a realist rabbi, I know that I will not see many of you in shul again for about 365 days. Part of the reason for that, no doubt, is because you and your family are still operating on the past presumptions of what the Shabbat experience is. I'm telling you, Shabbat at our shul will be different in the future. It will speak to you. It will excite you. I hope you'll give it a try.

I want to see you again. I want you to see each other again. I want us all to spend Jewish Prime Time together.

I want us to all spend Shabbat together. You don't have to come to shul for all 25 hours of Shabbat. You don't have to come at 9 am and leave at 1 pm. You might choose to come before 9 am for a run around Bexley with fellow congregants or to study Torah. You might come at 10:30 so your kids can participate in one of our many youth programs like Tots or Mini-Minyan or Kehillat Shabbat, while you take part in a learners' service, or a nature walk, or a discussion, or a yoga class, or join the prayer service. Maybe you come at noon for Shabbat lunch and stay for an interesting speaker. Or a football game, or a picnic, or a walk to the park for a picnic.

Friday night will become a more exciting time for our congregation as well. The traditional service will be there, but there will also be "Shabbat Shaboom" for our youngest members, "Shabbat Rocks" will be a livelier, more interactive Kabbalat Shabbat service with instrumentation before Shabbat begins, "Pajama Shabbat" when children will come to shul in their pajamas and hear stories, dance a little, nosh a little, and feel the warmth of Shabbat. We'll have big name speakers, nice catered dinners; family buffet dinners; singles meet and greet dinners, social get-togethers for singles, young adults and empty nesters like Tea and Shmooze.

Shabbat offers a unique rhythm of Jewish time. Each other day is counted in its relationship to Shabbat. When we recite the psalm of the day, each day in morning minyan, we say today is Yom Rishon L'Shabbat – the first day until the next Shabbat. We don't say it is "Sunday." We've already started the countdown. From Wednesday until Friday, we prepare for Shabbat. From Sunday through Tuesday, we live in the sweet glow of the Shabbat that has passed. Ahad Ha'Am famously said: "More than the Jews have kept the Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews."

Let us come together in the coming year and allow Shabbat to keep us as one people. For our young, for our old, for our members and non-members, Synaplex Shabbat will be a transformative experience for our congregation and for our community. It will be shul like you've never experienced it before. And it will be Shabbat like you've never experienced it before. I'm looking forward to experiencing it together.

See you at Synaplex!

Shanah Tovah!