

## To Stand or Not to Stand—A History, Eikev 5782

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Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Temple Beth-El is the third congregation I've served. Each community is different, of course; but there's one thing that synagogues all have in common from Chicago to Omaha to New York and probably all over the world.

And that is, possibly, the most often heard phrase in any and every congregation is: "This is how we've *always* done it."

If you've ever heard someone say that—or if you've said it yourself—there's a great [parody video](#) on YouTube you should check out.

It shows a bunch of Old Country Jews with long beards and *pe'os* davening in a little shul in the shtetl.

One by one, as each man walks in, he greets the congregants with a joyful "shalom aleichem" and touches the mezuzah on the door with his hand and kisses it.

After a whole bunch of them stream in and do this, one guy comes in and calls out, "*shalom aleichem*," and keeps on going. And he *doesn't* kiss the mezuzah.

Suddenly, the davening stops cold, and everyone goes quiet, and one of the men in the shul shouts at him in disbelief: "What about the mezuzah?! You didn't kiss the mezuzah!"

And the guy looks puzzled. "*Kiss* the mezuzah? Why would I kiss a mezuzah?"

"It's what we do!" they all say to him.

"Where is *that* written?" the guy asks.

On hearing this, the rabbi starts to faint.

"Look what you've done to the rabbi!" they say to him.

"It's not written. It's the rabbi's ruling. *Everyone* has to kiss the mezuzah. It's our custom!"

"Since when?" the poor guy asks. "I come to this shul every day, and we've never kissed the mezuzah!"

The men look at each other in astonishment.

"Since last week!"

"Oy," says the guy. "I was out sick last week!"

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"That's how we've always done it" is something we all say from time to time. And not to be intentionally hyperbolic.

We say it because, well, as far as we can remember—or *choose* to remember—we *have* always done it that way.

We internalize certain customs and ways of doing things because they give us warm feelings about the good old days: sitting in services with our grandparents, surrounded by our cousins; hearing the old rabbi speak in that booming voice that sounded like God; tasting the cookies at the oneg, and running around the building with our friends.

But, of course, there is actually very little of anything we do that “we’ve *always* done”—especially in Reform Judaism.

Because Reform Judaism is, in its very essence and philosophical DNA, all about change.

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I’ve been thinking about this all week because I have officially encountered the first major debate of my tenure at Temple Beth-El.

And that is: whether to stand or not to stand for the last verse of L’cha Dodi.

I gather that this has been a topic of some discontent long before my arrival. But by asking people to rise at this moment in the service, without also explicitly inviting them to remain seated if they prefer to do so, I have unwittingly deepened the controversy.

Now, I have to say in my defense that I have just done this reflexively; I haven’t given it any thought at all, let alone acted with any design.

In my 14 years as a rabbi, in both congregations I served previously, we stood for the last verse of L’cha Dodi. And I just assumed that’s what we do here, too.

It certainly did not occur to me that this practice would be in any way controversial.

But I was wrong.

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To stand or not to stand: that is the question.

This is actually a centuries-old debate in Judaism—not only regarding L’cha Dodi but also in regard to the Sh’ma.

Maybe you didn’t realize that.

Way back in the Mishnah, Hillel and Shammai argued about whether you should stand or sit for the Sh’ma.<sup>1</sup>

Can you guess what the traditional practice is?

Believe it or not, traditional custom is to sit for the Sh’ma.

Check it out next time you go to an Orthodox or Conservative synagogue. You’ll see that they sit for the Sh’ma.

Is that weird? Aren't we supposed to stand for the Sh'ma? I mean: it's "the watchword of our faith," right? Haven't we *always* stood for the Sh'ma?

Well, not always.

Actually, during Hillel's time and for about the next 2,000 years, pretty much everyone *sat* for the Sh'ma. Even Reform Jews sat for it for a long time.

According to the historian Jonathan Sarna, it was only in the late 19th century that Reform Jews in America adopted the custom of standing for the Sh'ma and reciting in unison.

And they did it, Sarna explains, as an ideological statement—an assertion of their unique religious identity in relation to the Christian culture around them.<sup>2</sup>

As much as our Reform forbears wanted to assimilate and be not *too* different from their Christian neighbors, they also wanted to stand proudly for their own particular brand of religion by saying: Hey, we are the ones who are the true monotheists here.

In other words, our custom of standing for the Sh'ma originated as a soft, but pointed, anti-Christian polemic.

Now, it's just "what we've always done."

But in the grand scheme of Jewish history, the late 19th century is pretty much like last week.

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And Reform Judaism has made other ideologically driven changes, too.

The sages who composed our daily liturgy originally chose a passage from this week's parashah for us to say along with the Sh'ma, right after the V'ahavta.

That passage, from *Deuteronomy* Chapter 11, says, in a nutshell: If you do all of God's commandments, the skies will open, and you'll get rain for your crops. If you *don't* do them, well, the skies will close and there will be *no* rain.

This passage has been part of the traditional Sh'ma for centuries, but the rabbis and scholars who wrote our Reform prayer books got rid of it.

Why? Because Classical Reform Judaism aimed to be a religion that was "in accord with the postulates of reason"<sup>3</sup> and science. And reason and science tell us that doing the commandments or not doing them has absolutely no bearing on whether or not it rains.

Even *Mishkan T'filah*, our most recent prayer book which includes so much more traditional liturgy than before, omits this passage from the Sh'ma.

And, we might say, for good reason: We want our prayers to accurately express who we are and what we believe.

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Which brings us to L'cha Dodi.

The Talmud tells us that some of the sages had the custom of wrapping themselves in beautiful cloaks on Friday night and going outside to greet the Shabbat bride.<sup>4</sup>

In the 16th century in Tz'fat in the Land of Israel, some of the Jewish mystics picked up on this Shabbat bride idea and taught that Shabbat is like the wedding day between God and the Jewish people—when they come together as one.

So, standing and turning to face the door to the sanctuary at the end of L'cha Dodi is essentially the Kabbalistic equivalent of what many Americans do whenever they attend a wedding—which is: At some point, the processional music pauses, and everyone stands up and faces the door, and the bride walks in wearing her stunning white dress, and we all marvel at her radiant beauty—and the energy in the room is tangible, and it's electric.

Standing at the end of L'cha Dodi is the same thing.

When congregations started singing L'cha Dodi, the Shabbat poem written by the Kabbalist Shlomo Alkabetz in the 16th century, many of them adopted the custom of standing and facing the door for the last verse.

But remember: Classical Reform Judaism prided itself on being a rationalist, scientific form of religion. And Kabbalah is pretty much the exact opposite of that: It's abstract, other-worldly, some might say "hokey."

And there's another thing:

Reform leaders also objected to L'cha Dodi's theology, which prays for the messiah to come and bring all the Jews back to the Land of Israel.

As Rabbi David Ellenson explains it: This theology "made early modern Jews nervous" that this prayer would "imply they did not feel fully at home in their host countries."<sup>5</sup>

So, not only did early Reform congregations not *stand* for the last verse of L'cha Dodi; they didn't even sing L'cha Dodi *at all*.

Take a look at the *Union Prayer Book* that many of us grew up with. L'cha Dodi isn't even in it, which means that there was a time when Reform Jews never sang L'cha Dodi.

My guess is that when TBE was founded in the 1920s, the congregation used the *Union Prayer Book*, and there was no L'cha Dodi in the service.

Then, at some point, we changed to *Gates of Prayer* and maybe L'cha Dodi was added. Or maybe not.

Now, we use *Mishkan T'filah*, and we do L'cha Dodi every Friday night.

Can we really say that *any* way is "the way we've always done it?"

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Reform Judaism is constantly changing because our particular tastes are always changing. The world around us is always changing. The ideas and practices and teachings we find compelling are always changing.

One of the great things about the prayer book we use, *Mishkan T'filah*, is that it doesn't include any stage directions in print.

That's intentional—so that each congregation and each individual congregant can decide for themselves what they want to do: what prayers they want to read, when they want to sit, and when they want to stand.

For the sake of *shalom bayit*—peace in the congregational home—from this point forward, when we come to the last verse of L'cha Dodi, I will invite you to stand if you want to stand and sit if you want to sit. (I even made a sign to remind me to do it.)

But please know this: It makes absolutely no difference to me whether you stand or not.

In the words of the Orthodox halakhic authority Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a man who was very openly no admirer of Reform Judaism: "People will do what they wish and, as long as the intent is to honor Shabbat, it is *fine*. ..."<sup>6</sup>

Each of us believes our own way and has the right to practice in our own way. In Reform Judaism, the only thing that matters is your *intention*.

So, to stand or not to stand?

If that's your question, my answer is: Do what feels right to you. And don't wait for a rabbi or a cantor to tell you what you should do.

All of us have *individual autonomy*—meaning: the right to make our own religious decisions and practice as we see fit. And I encourage you to use it.

Because *that*, my friends, is how we in Reform Judaism "have always done it."