



DJC Board of Directors Report

JEWS & NON-JEWS IN RITUAL LEADERSHIP ROLES

Since October 2015, in our *Year of Wrestling Together*, the DJC has held a series of community conversations on topics that are central to our community and that are core issues in contemporary Jewish life. The overarching questions have explored the relationship between tradition and change and the range of considerations, commitments, and values that guide us. Topics have included: *Why Should Judaism Survive/What Is Meaningful About Engaging in Jewish Life?*; *The Changing Boundaries of Jewish Community*; *What Is Ritual & Our Role Within It?*; *Ritual Leadership Roles for Jews & Non-Jews*; *The Dynamics & On-Going Impact of Anti-Semitism & Internalized Anti-Semitism*; *The Rabbi–Community Relationship*; and *God, Spirituality & Atheism*.

No issue we've discussed has attracted more passionate attention than the question of ritual leadership roles – what they mean, what knowledge and commitment are required of a person taking on a ritual leadership role, and whether or not these roles should be filled by a member of the DJC who is not, by birth or by choice, a member of the Jewish people. While all the topics we have grappled with this year are areas for ongoing and open-ended reflection, learning, and discussion, the question of the role of Jews and non-Jews in ritual leadership was one issue that required a decision to be made. At the end of this year, having wrestled alongside the community, the Board of the Danforth Jewish Circle and Rabbi Miriam have come to a decision, which we outline below.

The policy itself is important for our community. Equal in importance is the process of learning and listening, wrestling and decision-making that led to it, as well as the on-going learning process that will flow from it. This initiative has enabled us to foster the kind of dialogue and Jewish exploration that enacts the values of *chochmah* – cultivating wisdom, and *kavod* – cultivating respect for one another. These have proven to be essential ingredients for insightful, caring, and informed decision-making. The journey we've taken has shed light on who the DJC is at this stage of our growth, the range of ways we seek to engage with Judaism and Jewish learning, and the covenant/*brit* we as a community share with Rabbi Miriam. Although this has not been an easy process, we are deeply proud of the community and of our Rabbi for the thoughtful, respectful, courageous, and passionate way we have wrestled together this past year.

Ritual Leadership Roles for Jews & Non-Jews

What is the issue?

Since the DJC's founding, anyone in the DJC could take on any of the ritual leadership roles in a service. While it is not unusual for progressive and inclusive congregations in North America to welcome everyone to *participate* in all aspects of communal ritual and practice, in most Jewish communities acts of ritual *leadership* are reserved for Jews.

Ritual leadership roles are defined by Jewish sources as ritual actions in which one individual says a blessing or does a ritual/mitzvah *on behalf of* the whole Jewish community and acts as a representative of the Jewish people. Judaism's term for someone who enacts a ritual/mitzvah on behalf of others is a *shali'ach/shli'chat tzibbur*, a representative or messenger of the community/the Jewish people.

As part of the Board's process, we researched the policies of other progressive communities in North America. We turned especially to those communities with the stated objective of inclusiveness and/or progressive Jewish practice. In almost every case, at least one or more ritual leadership roles could only be performed by Jews. These progressive Jewish communities vary in the number of ritual leadership roles they would include in this category, but they often included:

- An individual reciting a prayer or blessing on their own on behalf of the community (eg. lighting Shabbat candles as an individual, having an individual aliyah to the Torah, leading a prayer).
- Chanting Torah on behalf of the community.
- Blowing shofar on behalf of the community.
- Lifting the Torah (*hagba*), dressing the Torah (*gelila*), or ritually carrying or holding the Torah as part of the Torah service/a Torah ritual.

What are the considerations?

In the course of our learning, we discovered several ingredients that were of central importance in order for the *shali'ach/ shlichat tzibbur* to lead the community with integrity. These included:

- Jewish knowledge related to the ritual action (eg. knowledge of Torah, of prayer and blessing, of the occasion being celebrated, how to do the ritual and why, etc.);
- understanding of the words one says (of the blessing or prayer) and affirming the personal integrity of saying those words (while there is a wide range of ways of interpreting them);

- developing the conscious intention of honouring Torah, honouring the Jewish people, and enabling others to engage in that particular Jewish practice through the ritual action/mitzvah of the *shali'ach tzibbur*;
- making a formal and abiding commitment to the Jewish people and Jewish life beyond the moment of the ritual;
- seeing oneself as part of the unfolding Jewish story – linked to the past and actively sharing responsibility for the future.

We explored various ways of taking these considerations seriously in the context of contemporary Jewish life.

Alongside these questions, concerns, and commitments, we explored what the DJC's commitment to inclusion entails. A number of DJC members, both Jews and non-Jews, including many of those who founded the DJC as a Jewish community that would be fully inclusive of non-Jewish partners, voiced concern that any role restrictions would represent a barrier to inclusiveness, symbolically casting non-Jewish members of our community as 'second-class citizens'. Our membership includes a significant number of non-Jewish partners and family members, and some people felt that to restrict some roles, even very limited ones, to Jews only would be to contravene a founding principle and spirit of the DJC. Some members of the community framed the importance of this commitment based on personal experiences of painful exclusion and alienation in many other Jewish communities. Others framed the issues in terms of the deep commitment and engagement of non-Jewish partners in raising Jewish children, participating in the vibrant life of the community, and actively contributing to the growth of the DJC. And still others addressed the issues as a matter of principle.

What is the DJC's solution?

We have weighed the content of the community conversations, as well as the reflections shared by individual community members in letters and in one-on-one meetings. As a Board, we researched the practices of other progressive communities and the reasons that animate their practices. As a Board, along with Rabbi Miriam, we have engaged in our own intensive learning and wrestling. Rabbi Miriam has also consulted with diverse rabbinic colleagues in Canada and the US.

At the end of this process, Rabbi Miriam and the Board have come to the decision that creating distinctions between Jews and non-Jews in terms of ritual leadership roles is not the right choice for this community. At the same time, we are committed to connecting our practices to the purpose and intentions of these ritual leadership acts.

The Board and Rabbi Miriam have arrived at the following policy:

- **Ritual leadership roles will remain open to all in the community, Jews and non-Jews.**

- **Anyone (Jews and non-Jews) seeking to take on a ritual leadership role is required to first engage in a process of Jewish learning, deepening their Jewish knowledge, understanding, and commitment.**

The details of this learning process will be worked out in the next few months by Rabbi Miriam in consultation with a committee, with the intent to having learning sessions in place prior to the High Holy Days.

We believe this practice offers us a compromise that meets the needs and supports the principles of our Rabbi, of key values and commitments in Jewish life, and of the diverse perspectives within the DJC community. Some of the strengths of this practice include that it:

- roots access to ritual leadership roles in Jewish behaviour, rather than Jewish ethnicity;
- honours our community's commitment to inclusiveness;
- honours and strengthens our commitment to learn and engage meaningfully with Jewish tradition;
- supports an understanding and acknowledgment of the particular meaning and intentions of these ritual leadership acts.

As a Board, we want to acknowledge that no decision we come to in relation to this very personal and complex issue is going to be right for everyone in our community. We have done our best to come to a decision that takes into consideration the diverse needs and perspectives of our community members, recognizing that as a community we will continue to engage in dialogue about these and other issues that affect our membership.

A Communal Spirit of Engagement

We couldn't have arrived at this compromise without the process that led to it. Ritual leadership roles was only one of the issues we've tackled this year in community conversations, but it provides a case study in healthy engagement: between community members, between community and Rabbi, and between community and Judaism. As Rabbi Miriam wrote in her reflections to the community about the community conversation held on January 25th, 2016, specifically about ritual leadership roles:

This most recent community conversation was difficult and brave, powerful and insightful. I continue to be moved by the process we are engaging in, learning from one another, learning from this ever-evolving Jewish tradition that nourishes us, shapes us, and that we grapple with together. We shared questions, commitments, and concerns with honesty and respect, even in the face of disagreement. This is rare and extraordinary. And what a deeply Jewish practice of wrestling it is.

Each community conversation has been co-facilitated by a Board member and Rabbi Miriam. Almost every session began with Rabbi Miriam offering different Jewish sources and perspectives on the issue, with open discussion flowing from there.

The process highlighted some important themes:

- *Open engagement with Jewish sources was valuable in deepening our understanding of the issues.* When we viewed Jewish sources as providing different categories of thinking and concern, rather than as didactic texts that are trying to get us to ‘believe something’, we had more fruitful and substantive conversations.
- *Having diverse community members and our Rabbi openly share their perspectives with each other was invaluable.* In every session, we heard a rich diversity of insight and experience; people’s eyes opened, minds shifted, beliefs were clarified in light of others voices. These were open, engaged, sometimes uncomfortable conversations where, for the most part, people *really* heard each other. For the Board, participating in these conversations was invaluable.

The Rabbi-Community Brit (Covenant)

In our community conversation on the *Role of the Rabbi & the Rabbi-Community Relationship* (March 7th, 2016), community members worked to draft a covenant, or *Brit*, between Rabbi and community, with both sides making a commitment to the other. The following is adapted from our work.

What is our Rabbi’s commitment to us?

- **To be a teacher.** Our Rabbi is a resource who deepens our understanding of Jewish wisdom, sources, tradition, and perspectives. Our Rabbi empowers the community with tools to be life-long learners and interpreters of Jewish texts and traditions.
- **To be a spiritual guide.** Our Rabbi is a guide for us on our journeys and a support through the phases of our lives, applying Jewish teachings and practices as tools for living fully.
- **To be an instigator.** Our Rabbi challenges us with different ways of thinking. She ‘afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted’.
- **To be a visionary leader.** Our Rabbi should have a robust vision and challenge us to grow beyond the status quo.
- **To be a Rabbi of the Jewish people.** Our Rabbi, ordained as *rav be’Yisrael* (Rabbi of the Jewish people), has a responsibility to preserve and strengthen Judaism and the Jewish people, richly connected to its past, the wider Jewish

people we are part of in the present and building toward a thriving Jewish future.

What is our commitment to our Rabbi?

- **To be engaged.** We engage with our Rabbi, and with Jewish learning, with openness and curiosity. We respectfully and honestly bring forth our questions and ambivalences. We don't disengage when we're uncomfortable.
- **To consider what we learn.** We use what we learn to inform communal decision-making, as well as to guide and support individual decisions in our own lives as we see fit.
- **To be visionary leaders.** We strive to cultivate our own leadership and vision, alongside the Rabbi's and in partnership with her, journeying to make the DJC a truly progressive, transformative Jewish community.

Put simply, it is our Rabbi's job to teach, guide, and challenge us. It's the Board and the community's job to engage with her, with Jewish sources, and with our Judaism, openly, vocally, and proudly. Together, we are bound in a spirit of generosity, openness, and commitment to the vision of the DJC.

Lines of Authority and Decision-Making

Finally, the wrestling process highlighted where there has been confusion about Rabbi Miriam's rabbinic authority. To be clear:

- Rabbi Miriam sets DJC practice for individual lifecycle events (*brit/bris milah*, individual Bar and Bat Mitzvah, weddings, funerals) as well as determining questions of *ishut* (Jewish status). The DJC, with Rabbi Miriam's leadership, remains one of the only congregations in Canada to recognize patrilineal as well as matrilineal descent.
- Communal practices, including what happens at community-wide services, is decided by the DJC's volunteers on the Rituals & Practices Committee, in partnership with Rabbi Miriam, and with approval from the Board.
- Decisions such as the DJC's ethical *kashrut* practices (vegetarian food only at DJC events) and the alteration of language in the blessing before Torah readings were both decisions that were decided by our Rituals & Practices Committee and approved by the Board.

Thank You

At our final Community Conversation, regarding *God, Atheism & Spirituality* (April 19, 2016), we discussed the DJC's commitment to providing a variety of 'ways in' to Jewish life and thought, regardless of where you're coming from. We discussed a range of ideas that capture the diverse interests and commitments of our members,

as well as confirmed the principal that we are a grassroots community and that people in the community can take initiative and responsibility to propose and organize events that they would like to see come to life at the DJC.

We would like to thank the community and Rabbi Miriam for the courageous work done over the past year to grapple with some very important and complex issues that touched the heart of the DJC. We are tremendously proud of the work done and the spirit of respect and generosity that characterized the process. Many of us, including our Rabbi, have had to make some hard compromises this year, and the Board would like to express its deep gratitude for the vision and courage of those in the community and of Rabbi Miriam for their commitment to dialogue and to thoughtful and respectful efforts to help the DJC grow. In keeping with our Vision Statement, this process has exemplified our intent to be a progressive Jewish community that strives to revitalize our traditions and culture with moral courage, creativity, and generosity of spirit.

*The DJC Board of Directors in partnership with Rabbi Miriam Margles
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