



You are invited to join Beth David in an experiment

The Board of Directors, and the Ritual Committee have approved a trial period of modified seating in the Beth David sanctuary with all the men on one side of the sanctuary and the women on the other to explore if this arrangement might better serve our entire community. Although there is no single prayer environment that everyone will agree is best, as a religious community we seek to create the optimum environment for the greatest number of our members. We are blessed to have a diverse congregation, with varied capabilities and experiences. While the needs or wants of each group do not always sync up completely, we can adjust our prayer seating to enhance the experience for most.

These are the two most important reasons for trying out this seating change:

1. Greater Choice for Men and Women

Instead of always being seated behind the men, women can now choose to sit at the front of the sanctuary, to better hear and see the *shaliah tzibbur*, which we hope will allow a greater sense of inclusion. Those not wishing to be ‘up close and personal’ can sit at the rear. This same choice will also be available to men.

2. Sanctuary Aesthetics and Accessibility

This arrangement provides direct access, without steps to either side of the sanctuary for those using a walker, a wheelchair, or a stroller

The trial will start on the Shabbat of March 3, 2018 and will continue through the Shabbat of September 1, 2018. Members are asked to participate in the trial by attending services as often as possible during this period.

We will collect data in the form of written responses to an opinion survey from members of the congregation. The survey will be available both on-line and in hard copy. After analysis of the data (which will be an open and transparent process) the Board of Directors will decide either to end the trial and return to the previous seating arrangement, or to continue with the new arrangement

A more detailed explanation of all aspects of the trial follows this page in the form of an FAQs (frequently asked questions) and answers.

Gatherings for people to ask further questions and/or give oral/face to face feedback, will take place at the synagogue at the following times:

Before Trial Period: Tuesday, February 27, 7:30 p.m.

During Trial Period: Thursday, March 22, 12:30 p.m.

Tuesday, April 24, 8:00 p.m. (immediately following minyan)

Monday, May 14, 12:30 p.m.

For further information or clarification, please contact Galya Greenberg, chairperson of the ritual committee, at bethdavidritualcommittee@gmail.com

FAQs

Background:

You may not realize it, but Beth David's seating has changed several times during its history. At one point, there was a mixed seating section in the sanctuary. Just as the membership evolved away from desiring that option, we believe that it is now time to update our seating to be more inclusive, responsive and accommodating to our current membership. The seating changes specifically address the following

1. Physically challenged members: People with mobility limitations (walkers, wheelchairs, etc.) can enter and be seated without having to deal with ramps or steps.
2. Young families: We are blessed with an enthusiastic cohort of young children who ascend the *bema* each week during *Anim Zmirot* to stand close to the *Aron Kodesh* and to receive their "Parsha Cards" from Rabbi Adler. The reconfiguration will allow both mothers and fathers to help their children on and off the *bema* from their respective sides of the room.
3. Women: There are women in the synagogue who are uncomfortable sitting and praying behind the men in the back of the room. The new configuration would allow both men and women to choose how close or far they wish to be not only from the *bema*, but also from the central *amud* from which the davening is led and the Torah reading takes place.
4. Our congregation is an eclectic group of people and families who observe *Halachah* in varying degrees—all over the spectrum! Just as we wish to be sensitive to women who would like to feel more included by sitting closer to the center of the room, so, too, do we wish to honor those members who would like us to have a more traditional *mehitza*. Please note: The current *mehitza* is halachically sound in both height and structure. However, it will not serve to separate men and women who are sitting on opposite sides of the sanctuary.

Taking all of the above into consideration, the Ritual Committee submitted a proposal to the Board of Directors in the belief that it is incumbent upon us to respond to the changing demographics of our membership while still retaining the qualities of a warm and welcoming Modern Orthodox synagogue.

Responding to the proposal of the Ritual Committee, the Board of Directors has agreed to approve a TRIAL period during which all members of the congregation can experience the more inclusive arrangement. During the trial period, feedback will be gathered from members of the congregation. At the end of the trial period, taking into consideration the membership feedback, the Board of Directors will decide upon one of two options:

- i. To return to the seating arrangement that existed before the trial period, or
- ii. To make the new arrangement the norm for Beth David.

1. What will the seating configuration look like during the trial period?

- There will be two equal seating sections for men and women, each on one side of the sanctuary.
- The men will sit in the area closest to the lobby and the women will sit on the opposite side, closest to the day care wing.

2. What is the timetable for implementation?

The trial will commence with the Shabbat of March 3, 2018 and will continue through the Shabbat of September 1, 2018.

3. Will we still need a physical barrier (*mehitza*) between the men and women?

- Yes. The current *mehitza*/physical barrier consists of the wooden panels, and the step below them, that form a wall in front of the first row in the women's sections. The current *mehitza* is halachically sound in both height and structure. However, it will not serve to separate men and women who are sitting on opposite sides of the sanctuary.
- The new *mehitza* will consist of movable panels made of translucent ("see-through") plexiglass with a wooden frame. They will be placed down the middle of the sanctuary. Two panels will be between the *bimah* and the *amud*, and one will be between the *amud* and the folding doors that divide the sanctuary and the *Kiddush* room.
- The panels consist of clear plexiglass in a wooden frame, thus allowing light and sight through the panels. NOTE: These *mehitza* panels should NOT be considered permanent and final. If the new seating configuration should become permanent, other panels may be considered based upon the membership feedback.
- The total height of the panels is 48 inches.
- The dividers may enhance the warmth and beauty of sanctuary.

4. How will this affect access for those with disabilities?

- With the new arrangement, both the men's and women's sections will be wheelchair accessible without a ramp.
- We will remove the ramp that leads from the social hall to the existing men's section.
- The synagogue possesses a portable metal ramp that can be used to make the central seating area and the *amud* (Torah reading platform) wheelchair accessible.

- Should the seating arrangement become permanent, we can consider other options so that all main areas of the sanctuary will be wheelchair accessible without the need for the portable ramp.

5. Has this type of seating been tried anywhere else?

Yes. In Modern Orthodox synagogues in both the U.S. and Israel, there is a clear trend toward locating the *mehitza* in the center of the synagogue during services and constructing the *mehitza* so that it can easily be removed for occasions that do not require a *mehitza* or moved in the event a different seating plan is desired. Examples of sanctuaries in our region with this arrangement include The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, B'nai Torah in Longmeadow, and Sha'arei Tefillah in Newton.

6. How will the congregation be informed of the trial?

Informational and educational materials will be sent via email to the congregation, and will be available in the synagogue lobby and on the Beth David website. Explanations about the trial will be offered during the Shabbat morning service. Four meetings have been scheduled at the synagogue that will be open to all members to discuss their questions and concerns. The times and dates are:

Before Trial Period:	Tuesday, February 27, 7:30 p.m.
During Trial Period:	Thursday, March 22, 12:30 p.m.
	Tuesday, April 24, 8:00 p.m. (immediately following minyan)
	Monday, May 14, 12:30 p.m.

7. Will congregants have a chance to provide input?

Yes. All members are encouraged to share their feelings, questions, and comments with members of the Board of Directors and/or the Ritual Committee. In addition, the Ritual Committee will prepare an online and hard copy form for comments and feedback. The link to the online form will be distributed in April in order to give everyone multiple chances to evaluate the trial. We recommend that you experience the new seating arrangement at least three times before expressing your final views.

We recognize that some people may be reluctant either to move their seat to another section or to make room for others who have moved. Some find that their customary pews provide a comfort level conducive to worship. Some may hold sentimental attachments to their current seats out of respect for family traditions or in remembrance of deceased loved ones. We hope, however, that you will recognize the benefit to all of us as a community in affording women the equal opportunity to enjoy seating with the same sight and sound access as the men.

8. How will the Torah circulate on Shabbat?

The route of carrying the Torah on Shabbat will remain the same as our current practice.

9. From where will the Rabbi speak?

Currently, Rabbi Adler speaks from either the pulpit or from the floor in the middle of the sanctuary. The rearranged seating does not change this.

10. How much will the reconfiguration cost?

No cost is involved in having a men's side and a women's side of the sanctuary other than the separation panels.

11. Will there be any changes to the chapel?

There are no plans to change the chapel. The seating in the chapel already is very flexible, and the chairs and the *mehitza* can be moved to fit the needs of the congregation.

12. How was it decided who should sit on each side and how will all parents have access to the children's room?

- Feedback from the membership will help the Board decide which sides of the sanctuary would ultimately be designated as seating for men and women. There are multiple considerations. These include, but are not limited to, access to the children's play area, use of the chapel as a 'pass through' area, and the primacy of the large double doors leading from the lobby to the sanctuary.
- Depending upon who sits on which side, either the male or female parents will need to pass through the chapel to get to the children's room. A *makom tefillah* is not supposed to be used as a passage, which means that the person going through needs to pause and say at least one verse. Whichever side the children's room is on--there will not be convenient and easy access for both parents.
- Parents will be able to sit in folding chairs placed outside the children's room, but further back than the pews, to keep an eye on their children while participating in services at the same time. Please note: This designated area is NOT part of the sanctuary for *mehitza* purposes, as ruled by our Rabbi.

For further information or clarification, please contact Galya Greenberg, chairperson of the ritual committee, at bethdavidritualcommittee@gmail.com