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D'var N'shamah
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Imagine this space, our intimate Shir Tikvah space, has just been filled with a sacred silence that comes after a deeply moving and unifying experience of hearing one of our wonderful guest speakers or guest musicians. Imagine this silence is magnified by the overflowing sense of community you feel as you turn to one another in this silence and simply smile. Maybe nod your head. You know... you know what the other is thinking and feeling at just that beautiful moment....

And so it was for the Shir Tikvah delegation who gathered with nearly 5000 of our closest colleagues and friends at this year's 2013 Biennial in San Diego. Even though Shabbat worship was in a space considerably larger than our dear Shir Tikvah, that sense of community and sacredness in the silent moments reverberated throughout everyone there to be something very palpable, very individual, and at the same time unifying.

I had moments like that both large and small during my time at Biennial. Whether attending a learning session on how to better engage older adults, to grooving at a morning minyan that celebrated the joy of Debbie Friedman's music, to stealing quiet moments outdoors in the California sun that was a welcome respite from our Minnesota winter, I felt community.

And what a community it is, our Reform movement! Through workshops, plenary sessions, worship opportunities, and interacting with fellow attendees, we learned about what other congregations are doing back home. And we as a Jewish people are blazing trails all over the place! Three themes emerged from my experience at Biennial - innovation, restoration, and expansion.

An example of innovation is visual t'filah where the prayers, songs, and images of the service were projected onto screens (or a white wall), creating the opportunity for leaving our hands and bodies free to be as expressive as we were moved to be. Congregations of all sizes are experimenting with this modality to much acclaim.

In the area of restoration, on Shabbat morning before gathering for the main service, we explored the psalms in smaller groups as part of shacharit. In many Reform synagogues, time spent on the psalms is often brief. But at Biennial, we sang, danced, prayed and otherwise had a full session of them, focused on preparing us for the main worship yet to come.

Finally, expansion. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, told us about its renewed commitment to youth engagement, highlighting a few key initiatives. One is allowing any Jewish youth to participate in URJ camps and programs regardless of synagogue affiliation or denomination. Another is to open NFTY to any teen that wants to join. Radical hospitality abounds!

Tying all three themes together is the Reform movement's new Machzor, the prayer book we use during the High Holy Days. Besides being gender neutral and having fully transliterated liturgy, the new Miskahn HaNefesh will be innovative with creative ways to bridge the personal experience with the communal; restorative by reintroducing the rich liturgical voices of the Jewish past and the aspirations of our people today; and expansive by offering alternative and creative readings. Stay tuned as Shir Tikvah prepares to update to this exciting new Machzor...

It's a great time to be Jewish. Shabbat Shalom!