

## A Circle in the Square: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin Reinvents the Synagogue

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This informative and inspiring book examines the confluence of a seminal time, the 1960's and 1970's, and a towering personality, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, which converged to revive Modern Orthodoxy in America. It traces the historical and spiritual background of Lincoln Square Synagogue (LSS) as well as exploring the indelible contribution Rabbi Riskin made with his unique vision. It would not be an overstatement to say that the ripple effects of Rabbi Riskin and the LSS are still being felt today. Much of what we take for granted in our religious life were once novel innovations, such as Beginner's services and many types of synagogue outreach. Many of the programs developed at LSS 'went national' and serve as models for shuls and *kiruv* organizations throughout the country.

The setting was the turbulent sixties, a time of spiritual searching outside of traditional religion. Many seekers were studying the wisdom of the East. New religions, cults, and communes were springing up out of thin air and vanishing just as quickly. The counterculture and opposition to the Vietnam War were radicalizing many young people, including many young Jews, who felt their religious institutions were hopelessly retrograde.

Within Judaism, the fledgling Modern Orthodox wing was still relatively small, with Yeshiva University as its flagship, the OU and Young Israel as it's main brand names, and a few prominent synagogues serving as it's membership. The Conservative Movement and the Reconstructionists were drawing more numbers, if not more commitment, from their members. The Havurah Movement boasted some success in bringing back joy and spirituality to worship, taking Judaism outside of the four walls of the synagogue, but these groups often succumbed to lack of structure and internal squabbling. Other Jewish seekers could be found dancing in the streets with the Hare Krishna or meditating in monasteries with the Buddhists. Many third generation Jewish Americans were feeling comfortably assimilated and became '3-day Jews' in their parents' synagogues. Overall, there was plenty of apathy, alientation, and ignorance to go around.

This historical moment coincided with two local phenomena: the urban renewal of the west side of Manhattan and the ordination of a young and energetic innovator in the person of Rabbi Riskin. LSS's first Rosh Hashana service took place in the ballroom of the Esplanade Hotel in 1964. Later the congregation moved into an enlarged apartment in Lincoln Towers and then finally into it's present home on Amsterdam Avenue.

A few biographical words about Rabbi Riskin are in order. Although his parents were not religiously observant, the young Riskin was very close with his grandmother who was both pious and learned. They spent every Friday night together and studied Chumash and Talmud together. His parents sent him to yeshiva rather than the local

public school, in order to ‘get a better education’, after which he attended YU’s Brooklyn Torah Academy high school, and then turned down a full scholarship to Harvard in order to attend YU as an undergraduate. He received his ordination there and was involved in the innovative Torah Leadership Seminar and later taught in their fledgling Jewish Studies Program (later named the James Striar School), the first time a ‘mechinah’ or beginner’s track was offered at YU to students without a classical Torah education.

Rabbi Riskin accepted his position at LSS in 1964 and served until he made *aliyah* in 1983, leaving behind him a bustling synagogue which served the greater New York area as well as its own membership. In Israel, Rabbi Riskin helped in the planning and building of the community of Efrat in the Gush Region and served as the mayor of Efrat for many years. He is now the head of the Torah Ohr Institutions in Efrat and Jerusalem and lectures and writes widely.

What were the main innovations of Rabbi Riskin and LSS? In 1965, Rabbi Riskin published an article in the LSS bulletin entitled “Our Credo”, a manifesto describing his vision for LSS:

The synagogue would be “...dedicated to the proposition that traditional Judaism can be meaningful for modern man. We are attempting to disregard the usual labels of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform in order to create a Spiritual Center rooted in the eternal truths of Jewish Law which is at the same time able to reach the most marginally-affiliated Jews.”

His dramatically different programming over the years included:

- Revitalized adult Jewish education which was open to non-members
- An atmosphere of open inquiry and intellectualism
- Dramatic and passionate sermons
- The centrality of Shabbat, including home hospitality and Turn Friday Night into Shabbos
- Prayer as a joyful (and highly musical) experience with Cantor Sherwood Goffin
- Beginner’s service and crash courses in Hebrew and Judaism
- Addressing the role of women in Judaism
- Total Outreach –literally taking *kiruv* into the streets
- Establishment of an afterschool Hebrew school which reached out to the parents
- Making the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry a major focus of social involvement

What was Rabbi Riskin’s secret, apart from his driving personality and passionate commitment to his fellow Jew? As Abramson speculates, since Rabbi Riskin was not raised in a traditional synagogue he was therefore somewhat free of the “old tried-and-true litanies about what was acceptable synagogue practice and what was not.” Perhaps it was easier for him to “become creative and iconoclastic” and freer to innovate as his intuition directed. He was firmly anchored by Halacha, of course, counting Rav Soloveitchik, Rabbi Daniel Besdin and Rabbi Samuel Belkin (among others) as his mentors. In fact, his first challenge was to convince his congregation to accept a *mechitza*. But by moving with the spirit of the times, he was able to incorporate the

concepts of open thinking and desire for personal meaning into the framework of traditional Judaism in ways that his colleagues had failed to do.

On a personal note, I remember the intellectual excitement and freshness which were found at LSS in those days. I was one of hundreds of young adults who had their first exposure to basic Judaism at LSS. I didn't always agree with what I heard in class but those classes laid the foundation for all of my later studies. As Abramson points out, something unique was happening there, there was a buzz of excitement and discovery which was hard to put a name to. Jews from all over the city, at every level of knowledge and observance, and from all walks of life were discovering vitality and meaning in their heritage and the atmosphere was electric. I hope you will enjoy this brief and well-written look at a very particular time and place and how it came to shape our lives today.