

Gina Levine and Dr. Nancy Crown

Congregation Rodeph Sholom

December 6, 2019 | 8 Kislev 5780

Meyer W. Nathans Service Award Erev Shabbat Service

*Gina Levine*

Shabbat Shalom.

I am deeply honored to share this Meyer W. Nathans Service Award with my dear friend Dr. Nancy Crown. It was a pleasure to know Mike Nathans and I'm humbled, as I know Nancy is, that our names are added to the most impressive roster of Meyer W. Nathans award recipients, each of whom has made an outstanding contribution to the caring community that is Rodeph Sholom.

Over ten years ago, our synagogue undertook an important engagement process called Congregation Based Community Organizing. I was assigned to talk to Nancy, a congregant and Rodeph Sholom School parent, but someone I really didn't know well. Nancy told me she had a daughter, Sadie, on the autism spectrum who couldn't find her place within the Rodeph Sholom community.

I relayed that feedback to my husband, Rabbi Levine. Nancy and her husband, Dr. Sam Weisman, then met with Rabbi Levine and pledged their help if we sought to address the personal and spiritual needs of a group of hidden Jews within our congregation.

We got major help from a very talented physician, Dr. Robert Accordino, who had formed an incredible non-profit organization called Music For Autism. Robert provided invaluable guidance and counsel in our beginning stages and ultimate launch of the initiative. Robert surprised us by being here tonight and we're grateful to him.

We pulled together a committee of staff and volunteers, too numerous to name, and were prepared to poll the congregation about what to do. Rabbi Levine spoke up and said that we should offer a special worship service that year on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Essentially, "If we build it, they will come." Shireinu was born.

Very gifted and inspiring Rabbis Ben Spratt and Leora Kaye, and music legend Louie Glaser, used their considerable talents, along with our talented American Sign Language interpreters and dozens

of wonderful volunteers, to organize the service. We were amazed at the turnout. Congregants brought children we had never seen. Others—non-members—came from all over the city, from Queens and Brooklyn, for what was an incredible spiritual experience. With tears in their eyes, they told us this was the first time they could feel comfortable in shule and that their child had never come close to a Torah before.

So much has happened in the last decade and we share this honor with everyone involved in Shireinu. Nancy and I agree it has “taken a village” to build Shireinu.

Since that first service, our synagogue has provided four holiday Shireinu services and an Erev Shabbat Shireinu Integrated Service every year. Shireinu’s model has been the subject of articles in the *New York Times* and other publications, and presentations have been made at a URJ Biennial, UJA, HUC, and JTS workshops. Our committee created an educational, instructional 5-part video series that can be found [on our Shireinu website](#) and close to 60 synagogues and churches have reached out to Rabbi Spratt for guidance as to how they might engage their special needs members.

Additionally, Rabbi Spratt and his equally gifted and inspiring colleague Cantor Shayna DeLowe have taught our Shireinu children and officiated at seven B’nai Mitzvah with two more scheduled this year; and Cantor DeLowe and Dr. Crown formed an amazing ASL Choir.

I can honestly say I have received far more than I have given. Shireinu has taught me how extraordinarily patient, devoted, and loving parents of special needs children are. Shireinu has taught me how we are all made in the image of God with different abilities and disabilities, so we should be nonjudgmental, accepting and inclusive of one another. Shireinu has taught me how much connection to a community means to people, and how Shireinu families have made our Rodeph Sholom community an ever more compassionate place, with our eyes and hearts open to the gifts every human being can share with each other.

All of this would not be possible without the incredible perception, professional expertise, and personal experiences of my truly extraordinary partner, Dr. Nancy Crown. I have not only gained a colleague but a close friend whom I deeply respect and admire. I’m also grateful for my relationship with her wonderful family Sam, Sadie, and Joseph, all of whom are active in our Shireinu community.

And of course, a big shoutout of gratitude to our visionary, beloved Rabbi Levine, who gave his full support and blessings to Shireinu from day one. And loving thanks to our wonderful Levine children and extended family, who continually express their pride in Shireinu and our roles nurturing it.

It's a pleasure to turn the microphone over to Nancy now.

*Dr. Nancy Crown*

As Gina has so eloquently expressed, we are both deeply honored and humbled to receive the Meyer Nathan's Service Award. We share this honor with the many people—clergy, congregants, and families—who have helped build Shireinu. I'd like to take a moment to share some thoughts with you about the beginnings of this journey.

You know those people who read the wishes from your eyes? In her comments, Gina left out the part about how she read a wish that even *I* hadn't acknowledged was there. About 11 or 12 years ago, when I was asked to attend a conversation with something called the Congregation Based Community Organizing Committee, I pictured a focus group and I was planning to decline. Not my strong suit. My husband Sam, who has always been my best advisor, said, "No, you should go." So, I went, and to my surprise, the focus group was me! Luckily, for me, the other person was Gina Levine. I was immediately reassured. Despite barely knowing Gina, I knew she was lovely, warm and interesting. We chatted, probably about our families, and then she dove into the heart of the conversation, and asked me what, from my vantage point, the synagogue could do better. The many, many rich offerings of CRS clicked through my mind and I said that I only wished I had more time to sample more of what was *already* on offer. But Gina persisted. "What *else* could CRS offer?" What kinds of activities would engage me and my family more? This went on for a while as Gina would not accept my polite deferrals. "Surely there must be *something* that you wish was available here?" It was then that I realized that my wish was for a place where my entire family, including my daughter, who is on the autism spectrum, could feel at home.

You have probably heard it said that a parent is only as happy as her least happy child. Well, in that moment with Gina's kind and persistent encouragement, I realized that as a parent I felt only as accepted as my least accepted child. I didn't feel comfortable bringing my daughter to a typical

service or synagogue event. Gina immediately sprang into action and the rest, as they say, is history, but I do have a little bit more to say. It has been an extraordinary privilege to work by Gina's side, to learn so much from her about effective leadership, generosity and collaboration. Our partnership, and her and Rabbi Levine's friendship enrich my life and that of my entire family in countless ways.

Shireinu is the community that grew from the efforts of a group of talented, generous, committed and courageous people. First, Gina, and a split second later, Rabbi Levine. Without Rabbi Levine's vision and passion for this effort, Shireinu, which he named, never would have launched, let alone soared. We have been so fortunate to have his rabbinic leadership along with that of Rabbi Spratt, who presides over the Shireinu services with his great grace, intelligence, and sensitivity. One of my favorite moments is the pause just before the service when he gathers the committee to teach us with just the right wisdom for the moment in a way that is both simple and profound. Then there is our amazing committee, including my children, Sadie and Joseph, and my husband, Sam. The entire committee brings their whole hearts and minds to everything we do, from brainstorming at meetings, to preparing for services, to greeting our families and making sure they have everything they need. We are so blessed by the families who come, some from great distances, making Shireinu the joyous worship community that it is. Shireinu would not be Shireinu without Louie Glaser and his famous guitar, Martin. We are gifted with skilled, creative, and thoughtful ASL interpreters. Along with Rabbi Spratt, Cantor De Lowe lends her stunning voice, her deep Judaic knowledge and her love of Judaism to teaching the Shireinu B'nai Mitzvah students. With just the hint of a suggestion, and despite her already overfull plate, Cantor De Lowe pulled together the incredible ASL Choir that you saw in tonight's service.

My fellow Shireinu parents and families who love and care for people who walk a different path will know what I mean when I refer to the transformative power born of painful wisdom when that wisdom is put to use to create something like Shireinu. For me, collaborating with these extraordinary clergy, congregants and families has been a profound privilege that has added much meaning to my Judaism. I want to thank each and every person that is Shireinu for this gift.

Shabbat Shalom.