

When I arrived at Stanford two years ago, I felt like I didn't belong yet – but I knew there was a space for me at Hillel. On Shabbat, I went to check out the services: a Reform service full of English songs, a traditional service featuring a gender divider, and a mixed service with familiar melodies. I sat down there – and realized that the reason everyone was chatting about their spouses was because it was for graduate students. The embarrassment and confusion of not knowing where I belonged stuck with me, and I didn't go to services after that.

This spring, a friend asked if I would accompany her to services so she could say Kaddish for her father. I sat with her behind the divider. I was angry that we started late waiting for men to come, happy to hear the prayers I had missed, and frustrated that when the men knocked down the curtain, they hastily put it back before they could make eye contact with us. Feeling so unwanted made it hard to focus on the prayers, and I understood why many of my female friends declined to go to services.

I met with the students in charge to ask why there was no egalitarian Hebrew service. I got many answers – it'll take people away from other services, there isn't enough interest, etc. But I surveyed the Jewish community and rustled up interest, until they agreed to have a pilot service late this spring. The day of, I anxiously waited for a minyan to arrive, but luckily, when women count it takes less time for services to start! I loved the excitement we felt at being a part of something new. And when everyone joined together for dinner that night, the room was fuller than I had seen it in a long time, and I learned that all of the services had had a minyan.

This project isn't over – in the new year, we will hopefully convert our pilot Shabbat into a regular occurrence. But what I learned the most from this experience was that when we have more opportunities for people to participate in the way they want, we all benefit because we have a larger community and more faces to share our moments with. So shanah tovah, and to a new year sweet with new ideas and doors opened ever wider.