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CREATING A MEANINGFUL PRAYER ENVIRONMENT I: TEFILLAH-CENTRIC TEFILLAH

Elli Kranzler, MD

A friend recently told us that the Puritans used to have a poker, a long stick, which they would use to wake up people who fell asleep during their prayer service. This friend suggested that we institute pokers in our Shuls, and the *gab-bai* in charge be called the Pokeman.

Perhaps we do not need pokers to improve the Shabbat morning *tefillah*, really, we just need to take it seriously. Prayer is really a gift, an opportunity to reflect, to go inside and to connect with God. As a community, our goal needs to be to create a *tefillah*-centric culture. One in which we care about our *tefillah* enough that we are willing to make time, contribute energy, ideas and effort toward developing a “good davening.”

Truthfully, in some way, it is easier to daven alone, or with family, in a beautiful, inspiring setting. In the soaring mountains in Montana, or the heavenly blue Caribbean waters, it is easier to personally communicate with God, to create my own pace and rhythm. I can focus on a particular *tefillah*, study it and engage in a careful, meaningful recitation of that prayer. When I daven alone I can proceed at my own pleasure and relate to Hashem in a manner that is meaningful to me.

Why then do the *hakhamim* ordain the concept of *minyán*, of *tefillah beTzibur*?

Beyond the power of the “*zekhut* of *Knesset Yisrael*” being so much greater than the merit of the individual, there is the notion of *areivut*. I am responsible for you, not just for myself. I am not just responsible for my own communication with my Maker. I am also responsible for your interaction with the Holy One. If you cannot read the text, then I can “be *motzi* you;” having you in mind, I can help you fulfill your obligation. *Areivut* is communicated in the context of our prayer service. We come together to pray as a community.

But beyond our responsibility to each other there is also our need for one another. In the Kuzari, Rabbi Yehuda haLevi suggests most of us are unable to form and express a complete prayer. But together, you and I can piece together

* Transcript of remarks presented at the YCT Community Yom Iyun held on Dec. 26, 2004 at Cong. Ohab Zedek in New York City.

moments, thoughts, feelings, and *kavanah* to create a unified whole, a prayer. Our prayers are then prayers of interdependence, prayers of mutual responsibility. The congregation, *kehillah*, as a unit, becomes an active player in prayer. Each member of the *tefillah* community is necessary. We are completely dependent on each other. The energy, the devotion, the outcome of your prayer depends on mine, and my prayer depends on yours.

SUGGESTION #1

We sign on to a community mission statement—it goes without saying that we should stop talking during *tefillah*, which is important in and of itself. Coupled with this, a larger mission is called for, namely:

I am willing to commit myself to becoming an engaged *mitpalel*, a member of an active community of “daveners.” That means I will actively participate, contribute, care about *tefillah betzibbur*. I will do my part to join in, to not interrupt with private conversation, but instead, I will work on my personal prayer and contribute to my community’s prayer.

Some of us do not want to violate the trust of our fellow *mitpalelim* by talking, but still find it difficult to *daven* in a focused way for three and a half hours on Shabbat morning and bring along good books to read during davening. This is obviously a *bedieved* solution. I am reading a book or learning instead of being engaged in *tefillah betzibbur*. It reflects the defense of intellectualization. “I would rather not deal with the challenge of *davening*.” Being an intellectual Jew is something I can be more comfortable with, than an unsure *ma’amin*, which is what I have to confront when I engage in *avodah shebalev*, service of the heart.

The truth is *davening* is not an intellectual exercise. It is a spiritual, emotional journey. What follows therefore is:

SUGGESTION #2

Throw away the side books. Try to make the *tefillah* personal, and meaningful

To that end—during our *tefillah* each Shabbat morning, pick one prayer. Ask the community to read it in English. Pass out a piece that we can all study that will help us understand this *tefillah*. Quietly ponder its significance and personalize it. Then recite the prayer.

An example: Rabbi Saul Berman has suggested that each person saying *kaddish*, briefly describe the deceased for whom he or she is reciting *kaddish* to his

or her fellow *mitpalelim*. As a result of this brief interlude, when we respond with “*yehei shmeih Rabbah*” and *Amen*, there will be a more powerful connection between the one saying *kaddish* and the responder. This is an example of attention to the inner experience of the prayer that can transform the encounter of *tefillah*. We need to give ourselves the opportunity for our prayer to be reflective, personal, uninterrupted, while at the same time communal.

It is true that Shabbat morning *tefillah* is long. Studies of attention span demonstrate that most of us are unable to concentrate for that long, 3-3½ hours. As a result, some of us choose “zip *tefillah*,” *a la* many *hashkamah minyanim*, or *Eretz Yisrael davening*. While efficient, these *tefillot* often seem lifeless, ‘*yotzei zein*’ versions. Get it done and get out.

Others deal with the length problem by coming late to shul. If shul starts at 8.30, show up at 10 and you will get the highlights, sermon, and *Musaf*.

One option is to shorten the script—get radical. *Daven* until *nishmat* on our own, or cut out *hazarat hashatz* of *musaf*, as the Rambam suggests, definitely get rid of *mishheberakhs* and any unnecessary add-ons. These are possibilities that can be explored by each community in a way that reflects the seriousness of purpose, the goal of heightening our *tefillah*, rather than an attempt to short-cut the problem.

Keriat haTorah can be long and disengaging, particularly for those who are not completely fluent in Hebrew.

SUGGESTION #3

Make *keriat haTorah* an engaging learning experience. Before each *aliyah* pose questions. After the *aliyah* discuss the questions drawing ideas and participation from the *kehilah*. This can be done, skillfully by talented teachers, in a way that does not take too long, and makes the *keriah* informative and engaging.

Due to the language barrier in *tefillah* and *keriat haTorah* some communities, therefore, focus on “Moments of Meaning” in English, and inspiring sermons. These efforts may make the time pass in a more interesting or entertaining manner, they are not replacements for meaningful *tefillah betzibbur*. Our energies need to be directed at developing a relationship with the words of prayer, articulating them, understanding them, personalizing them, focusing on particular prayers each time, while also recognizing and respecting the limits of our attention spans.

SUGGESTION #4

Tune-up the *tefillah*.

Why does singing help our *tefillah*? Song expresses our love for God and God's demonstrated love for Us. Our *ahavat Hashem* is central to our spiritual beings. It needs expression. If I am lovesick I communicate my passion in love songs. The words of *tefillah* are poetry, our attempts to convey our love verbally. The melody conveys the emotion, and expresses the intensity and beauty of the connection we feel with our beloved. My daughter Liron once wrote: "On their own, lyrics are similar to poetry, yet when they are intertwined with a melody, their power increases. The words float off the page to stretch their fabric over the music's fluid form, creating something firm, a form that moves with expression and grace."

Hasidic prayer taught us the communal joining power, as well as the emotional *koach* of linking the spoken prayer with the inner feeling of prayer with the help of *niggun*, song. R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi quotes the *Ari*, Rabbi Isaac Luria, who suggests that in the World to Come, the Levites will be the Priests. Perhaps this could mean that the ultimate service of Hashem, will be to "raise the voice of melody and thanksgiving with song and music, with tunefulness and harmony", in a manner similar to that of the angels.

Rabbi Yehudah heHasid, in the Book of the Pious, the *Sefer Hasidim*, written in the late 12th century, writes, "Pleasant melody enhances the *tefillah* by aiding concentration, by arousing feelings."

The choice of melody has to be tailored to the intention of the prayer. Song creates mood of readiness, a frame of mind which is receptive and focused and geared up for engagement. If so, then when we chose to sing melody in prayer, it should be a thoughtful choice. One which respects the mood and the intention of the prayer to which it is being paired. It needs to be a choice which both reflects the prayer and also potentially deepens our understanding and relationship with the prayer.

SUGGESTION # 5

Sit with our children. Do not just send them to groups or children's services. Whenever possible we should spend time in *tefillah* with our children. As parents, we must be constantly conscious that how we *daven* will impact on a lifetime of *davening* for our children. It will help define their relationship with God.

Personally, I learned *tefillah* by attending the school of "Sitting Next to My Father," Dr. Gershon Kranzler, *z"tl*. His relationship with God, the beauty of his private *tefillah*, the seriousness with which he engaged in a dialogue with

haKadosh Barukh Hu, is what made me care about *davening*.

My other teacher in *tefillah* was Reb Shlomo. Why does Reb Shlomo's Friday night *nusah* work? It is innovative, but rooted in Reb Shlomo's grasp of *nusah*. It is spirited and uninhibited at the same time serious and deep. It asks us to give of ourselves. Reb Shlomo's *niggunim* invite participation. The *kehillah* feels compelled to join, singing the songs and harmonizing as the *shaliach tzibur* leads the *nusah*.

The *nusah* stimulates us to examine the words of the *tefillah* and at the same time encourages us to venture beyond the words, in our communication with Hashem. A harmonic community develops. *Davening* becomes a family and communal experience. Child next to parent, parent next to child, joyously, seriously engaged. This becomes the convincing image that defines our developing spiritual relationship with God.

These are 5 simple suggestions, ones that will not replace an ongoing constant commitment to working on our *avodah shebalev*, but ones that will reflect the effort of a "Conscious Community of Prayerful Prayers."

Suggestion #1 — We sign on to a community mission statement of *arevut*

Suggestion #2 — Throw away the side books. Try to make the *tefillah* personal, and meaningful

Suggestion #3 — *Keriat haTorah* — Make it an engaging learning experience

Suggestion #4 — Tune-up the *tefillah*.

Suggestion # 5 — Sit with our children