

Rabbi's Sermon
Rosh Hashanah 2009 / Day 2
By Rabbi Steven Edelman-Blank

Our congregation hosted a United Synagogue Youth convention a few weeks ago. When you see our youth advisor, Mike Siegel, please congratulate him on all his hard work making this event a success. It was great having so many young people visiting our synagogue.

The teens conducted the services during the weekend. I still sat up on the bimah here, however, and could see out into the congregation. When I looked at the teens from up here, I could see that most of them were not particularly interested in the service. Eyes rolling. Books closed. Lots of chatting. I should let you know that I was an USY advisor for a number of years before going to rabbinical school. Part of my job was to hand out prayer books to the teens at conventions. Time and time again the same thing would happen. I would reach out with the book and the teen would not raise his or her hand to take it. You would think that I was trying to pass out some type of nuclear waste. When I would ask how they would participate in the service, I always got the same answer “ I have it memorized.” Oh, really?

So this time I decided to try something different. Being a rabbi now instead of a youth advisor, I have more opportunity to ask questions. I asked the teens, why do we do services? What did I get back for answers?: it is our religion, tradition. Not only did none of their answers mention God, none even suggested that a prayer does anything for the person saying it. Just the party line.

Now, I do not want to give you the wrong impression. **I do not get angry at teens or kids who are not praying in synagogue.** In general, you will not see me shush a kid in services, or ask why he or she is not paying attention. I have come to realize that it does not make any sense to do this. **How can I say anything to the teens when I only need to look over an aisle or two and see that their parents and the other adults in the synagogue are doing the exact same thing? How can I criticize the teens when most of the people at the service look disinterested?**

Let's actually talk about the elephant in the room. Week after week our congregation holds services. Some people may come every week while others only twice a year. Unfortunately, many of us do not feel any real connection with the service when we are here. It does not really touch many of us. If we do feel a connection, this connection might come more from feelings of nostalgia from memories of going to services with our parents rather than from any inspiration we gain from the service itself.

So... let me dispel a myth. **The cantor and I are not sadists.** The question I have been asked the most since I arrived here was how long so-and-so service would last, particularly on the High Holidays. This is a fine question. I usually want to know the same thing. However, I also feel that underlying this question is often the suggestion that the cantor and I actually want the services to last as long as possible. Like somehow, we never get fidgety either. Like we do not want to go home for lunch too. As if we could not be happier if we could just add another additional service. Let's get them to stand up for another twenty minutes. Wah-ha-ha!

This is just not true. That is not our goal. **However, I do want to recognize that I think I somehow see Jewish prayer and services differently than many of the other people in this room.** Traditional Jewish worship works for me. I get something out of it and can feel satisfied. I have been trying to figure why I feel this way when other people do not. Let me share what I have come up with.

First of all, I should let you know that I do not think the problem is only about the use of Hebrew in the service. This would seem like the obvious answer though. Of course you find it easier to enjoy the service, you're the rabbi and you speak Hebrew. However, as I have mentioned to many of you, I did not grow up speaking Hebrew or going to day school. In Hebrew school, I learned how to read Hebrew phonetically to prepare for my Bar Mitzvah, but I did not learn the meaning of the words. Though I attended an after-school program for high school students, I avoided Hebrew classes like the plague. I did not begin to try to study Hebrew seriously until I had decided to go to rabbinical school in my mid-twenties. However, I had already formed my connection to Jewish prayer. Even today, when I pray, I usually do not translate the words. Worrying about understanding the words usually gets in the way.

Rather, I think the much of the problem has to do with expectations that people bring to Jewish prayer. I think the fact that we use books during services throws people off. Logically, we tend to expect that we are engaging in an intellectual exercise when we have a book in our hands. That is what we usually do when we start reading a book. Even with a novel, our main goal is to understand: understand the subject being discussed or understand what the author is trying to say. Therefore, when we pick up a prayer book, we expect to do the same thing. When we open the pages though, we

see text written in another language. More importantly, even the English may not make much sense to us. It may seem that the text is not talking about anything relevant to our lives. It speaks in metaphors that no longer have the same power that they did for our ancestors. For example, God is often referred to as our king. That is the Malkenu in Avinu Malkenu. But what does that mean to us, living in a country in which the idea of kingship was rejected as part of its founding? Even in English, we do not understand, we do not relate, we do not connect. Instead, we walk away feeling numb and untouched.

But...what if understanding the prayer book is not the main point? For me, prayer is not an intellectual exercise. Rather, prayer is an experience. It engages other parts of me than my mind. Often, I get a feeling that I only get when praying. The singing and the melodies touch my heart, particularly when being led by an amazing talent as our cantor. I even get wrapped up in the motions I make with my body. Even what seems like mumbling to others is part of the experience. At the same time, my mind wanders. I am not looking to agree or disagree with exactly what every word or sentence says.

I am not saying that I totally ignore the words. **They give me themes** to focus on: gratitude, love, death, the purpose of our lives. Often, just knowing the theme discussed in the prayer is more helpful to me than knowing the exact translation. We know that the rabbis who compiled the prayers into this book wanted it to serve as an educational tool. It was meant to teach concepts they wanted the masses to carry with them on a daily basis. However, this does not mean that we need to get trapped in every word every time we pray. Maybe I do not agree or understand some of the phrases in the prayer book.

That does not mean that I cannot partake in Jewish prayer. It is not totally about the words.

We relate to music this way all the time. I am one of those people who loves to hear good song lyrics. On the other hand, my wife rarely focuses on them. She judges a song not primarily by if she agrees with the lyrics, but how the song as a whole affects her through its melody and rhythm. Think about it. Bob Dylan has continued to have a strong musical career for decades. No one has really understood a word he has said since 1979. The Beatles did not become an international sensation because people suddenly believed there were eight days in a week.

I tend to compare Jewish prayer to activities that are much more physical than reading a book. My prayer is an action, not just passive contemplation. The tractate of Talmud called Brachot discusses why there are certain times by which the different services, like the morning service, and the afternoon service, need to be said. The main answer given is that the services take the place of different sacrifices, each of which had to be completed by a particular time of day. Please remember that, before the destruction of the Temple, the main way the Jews connected with God was through sacrifices. After the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis had to reconstruct Judaism so it would focus on prayer and study. It can be hard for us as modern people to understand the impulse for sacrificing animals. **However, we can understand that there is nothing passive about bringing down a knife on an animal.** This act is what our prayer replaces and substitutes. Not just someone sitting down and reading a book.

I think most of us would agree that we are quite happy that our people has substituted prayer for something as violent as sacrifices. **However, we should not lose sense of the idea that prayer is real action.** When we move our lips to pronounce the words of the prayers, we are *doing something*. I may not totally understand the words I am saying, but just the act of saying them is *doing something*. I may start thinking about watching a football game or doing my laundry while saying some of these words, but I am *doing something*. At the same time, even just humming along or tapping my hand against the seats is a way to be involved in Jewish prayer. We should always strive to understand our tradition more and more, but we do not have to understand it all before getting involved in it.

I think that this idea might help explain something that seems really annoying about services. Every service we do contains an Amidah. I have been asked why do we need to say the Amidah again if we said it once earlier in the service. Why recite the Musaf Amidah if we did the morning Amidah already? This practice makes no sense if we think of reciting Jewish prayer as reading a book. Why would you want to read the same passage over and over again, particularly if you did not find it particularly exciting or relevant the first time? However, if we understand saying the Amidah as an active experience, something we are doing to connect with God, it makes sense that we would do it more than once on holy days. Let me make another comparison. **I hug my wife every day.** It is an act I do to express my affection for her. If I give her a hug in the morning, no one asks me why I am giving her another one in the afternoon. No one asks me why I am doing it again if I already did it once before. Furthermore, no one is particularly surprised if I hug her more times on our anniversary, a day on which we

celebrate the connection between us, than other days. On the holidays, we are particularly aware of our relationship to God. Therefore, it is not unreasonable that we do more prayers on these days, even when they are similar.

Simply put, connecting with Jewish prayer can be difficult. It can be particularly hard during the High Holy Days, when we are asked to do so much of it. **I think it can be helpful to remember that we are not be asked to just read a book in a way that seems impossibly slow. We are being given the opportunity to join together in holy activity.** One that can have an impact on us in many ways.

Please join in any way you can. Say “Amen” at the end of a blessing. Tap on the chairs. Hum along. Give it some time. It all takes practice, but it does become easier over time.

Shanah Tovah! A happy and healthy new year!