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Tefillah Education:
Welcoming the Next Generation of Jewish Pray-ers

It is 5:00pm on a rainy Tuesday afternoon, and I am sitting with my fifth grade class in the sanctuary of a large urban Reform congregation. All around me kids whisper, giggle, talk, and fidget in the pews. They make inappropriate noises. They pass notes. They play with their cell phones. In some cases, they throw things back and forth amongst themselves. I do everything I can to get them to pay attention, to join in prayer with the song-leader up front, who is valiantly trying to get the students to notice him. I repeatedly shush the kids. I ask them politely to please stop talking, open their siddurim, and join us in prayer. When that fails, I switch gears and try instead to be a role model, diligently participating in the service myself, as if it were a meaningful, powerful, prayerful experience for me (which, unfortunately, it is not). We run through prayer after prayer, song after song, until finally we dismiss the kids and they run out of the sanctuary as fast as possible.

This scene plays itself out in one way or another in countless synagogues around the country day after day, week after week, year after year. And yet, I wonder, is this how we want our children to learn prayer? Is the scene I describe the image we want our children to associate with Jewish communal worship? Can't we do better than this? Religious school services like the one above – in which students are bored and teachers are frustrated – serve as one component of “tefillah education” in many congregational, supplementary schools. Though there is very little literature written about the topic, if we take a close look at non-Orthodox congregational schools, it seems that tefillah education is in fact a central component of the curriculum at most of them (though few, if any, schools label it “tefillah education”). In many congregations, what I call “tefillah education” for youth – education for entry into a life of Jewish worship – includes weekly religious school services, Hebrew instruction for the sake of learning how to read from the siddur, and lessons geared toward greater understanding of key prayers (Shma & V'ahavta, Avot, Oseh Shalom, etc).

In her article “From the Congregational School to the Learning Congregation: Are We Ready for a Paradigm Shift?” Isa Aron explains that “the congregational school of today is the inheritor of [a] dual legacy”: the communal Talmud Torah combined with Jewish parents’ interest in b’nai mitzvah preparation for their children.¹ While prayer was not one of the primary components of communal Talmud Torah curricula (though “sufficient knowledge of Hebrew” was)², b’nai mitzvah preparation has been extremely important to Jewish parents over the last few generations. As a result, “the bar/bat mitzvah has [become and] remained the focal point of the congregational school, regardless of its official curriculum.”³ Since most students lead part of a Shabbat service in the course of their bar/bat mitzvah experiences, the teaching of prayer-book Hebrew and basic competency in key prayers have become significant components of religious school education in most congregations today. However, due to the focus that most congregational schools put on b’nai mitzvah preparation and not necessarily on “tefillah education” in general, perhaps it is not surprising that few congregations have taken a step back to look at the big picture. It is time for congregations to ask, “How do we educate our youth for a lifetime of prayer?” “How might we better prepare our children for entry into Jewish communal worship throughout their lives?”

Another question seems immanent as well: despite the large amount of time and resources that many congregational schools dedicate for “tefillah education” (usually in the context of b’nai mitzvah preparation), why do so many Jews – both children and adults – nevertheless feel uncomfortable and incompetent in Jewish worship? Furthermore, given that

¹ Aron, Isa. “From the Congregational School to the Learning Community: Are We Ready for the Paradigm Shift?” in *A Congregation of Learners: Transforming the Synagogue into a Learning Community*, edited by Aron, Lee, and Roseel. New York: UAHC Press, 1995, p.57.

² Friedlander, Israel. “The Problem of Jewish Education for the Children of Immigrants.” In *Jewish Education in the United States: A Documentary History*, edited by Lloyd Gartner. New York: Teachers College Press, 1913/1969.

³ Aron, p. 61

only a small percentage of liberal Jews in America attend worship services regularly (once/month or more),⁴ could it be argued that the lack of regular participation is, in part, due to the absence of high-quality tefillah education? Surely it is true that good worship “does not happen automatically,” and unfortunately, as Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman points out, “much that passes for worship in church or synagogue is baffling or banal to most of the people who find their way there.”⁵ But, I wonder, as books, synagogue transformation programs, and consultants try to help synagogues improve their worship, where are our communal efforts toward improving education for worship, education for tefillah? I believe that we can do better with tefillah education in the liberal Jewish community in the 21st century, that improving the status quo is both desirable and possible.

Although many Jewish children become adult worshippers because of their experiences with tefillah at summer camp, youth group events, Israel trips, and/or Hillel services in college, I believe it is nonetheless essential for us to improve tefillah education in our congregational schools. There are two main reasons for this. First, the vast majority of American Jews who receive some kind of Jewish education do so in congregational supplementary schools.⁶ Many Jewish children do attend camps, youth groups, and the like, but congregational education reaches far more of our youth. Second, and more importantly, tefillah is most often experienced in the context of synagogue life. There are other places where Jewish worship happens, of course, but the synagogue is the primary place that Jewish adults come into contact with communal prayer, and indeed, where they come into contact with Judaism in general. Therefore, I believe

⁴ National Jewish Population Study 2000-2001; See <http://www.ujc.org/page.html?ArticleID=46194>

⁵ Hoffman, Lawrence. *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only*. 2nd Edition. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing. 1999. P. 10.

⁶ National Jewish Population Study, 2000-2001. <http://www.ujc.org/page.html?ArticleID=46234>

we ought to do – and we can do – a better job within the context of our synagogue schools welcoming and educating the next generation of Jewish pray-ers.

Tefillah education has also become more important in congregational schools since the nature of tefillah itself has changed, particularly in Reform synagogues. As worship has moved away from classical Reform (in which the rabbi, cantor and choir lead everything, and the worshippers need only to listen and be able to read responsively in English), toward more participatory worship, people need to learn how to participate as well as to lead. Many Jews feel uncomfortable and incompetent in contemporary worship services because they were never inducted into a participatory prayer experience, and because their education for prayer was not sufficient. I surmise that many people want to participate in contemporary prayer services and that they like the direction worship is moving (the classical model feels too “cold”), but they simply don’t know how to be part of a Jewish prayer community. They need education. The need to educate for prayer is more important than ever if we want our worship to be participatory. As worship changes in our synagogues, education for worship must change, too.

Tefillah education is not easy. It involves biblical and rabbinic texts, history, tradition, ritual, and perhaps most significantly, God. Prayer goes hand in hand with theology, so good tefillah education must necessarily allow room for questions and discussions about God. Strong tefillah education necessitates the collaboration of clergy, educators, lay leaders, teachers, parents, and students, and it demands that each synagogue determine for itself what counts for “success.” Effective tefillah education requires teachers who feel comfortable with and passionate about tefillah. It may call for us to re-imagine and in some cases transform our weekly religious school services. Most importantly, as our Rabbis understood centuries ago, tefillah education must be a process of enculturation, not simply instruction in Hebrew letters

and words and songs.⁷ Isa Aron suggests that “the congregational school ought to conceive of its educational task in different terms, as one of enculturation... a loving induction into the Jewish culture and the Jewish community.”⁸ This is nowhere more important than in the realm of prayer, for which I posit that imitation, education, habituation, and enculturation are all necessary components for more of our children to become adults who want to engage in regular tefillah with the community.

It is time we re-assess how our congregations do “tefillah education” and ask the following questions: How might we better welcome our youth into Jewish communal prayer? What do we want our students to know, feel, and be able to do in the context of tefillah? Rather than being satisfied with giving our students the training and skills they need for the day they become b’nai mitzvah, how could we better prepare our children for a lifetime of prayer, a lifetime of Jewish communal worship? As Rabbi Hoffman asserts, “ritual is at the heart of today’s synagogue transformation,” and Jewish communal prayer, as religious ritual, “binds people to tradition, connects them with the transcendent, and bonds them to each other.”⁹ If these aren’t our goals for congregational education, then what are?

⁷ See Babylonian Talmud Yoma 82a for the use of the Hebrew word *l’hargil* – to habituate, train, make something regular. I would argue that the Hebrew word *l’hargil* corresponds best to the English word “enculturation.”

⁸ Aron, p. 66

⁹ Hoffman, Lawrence. *Re-Thinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing. 2006, pp. 107 & 98.