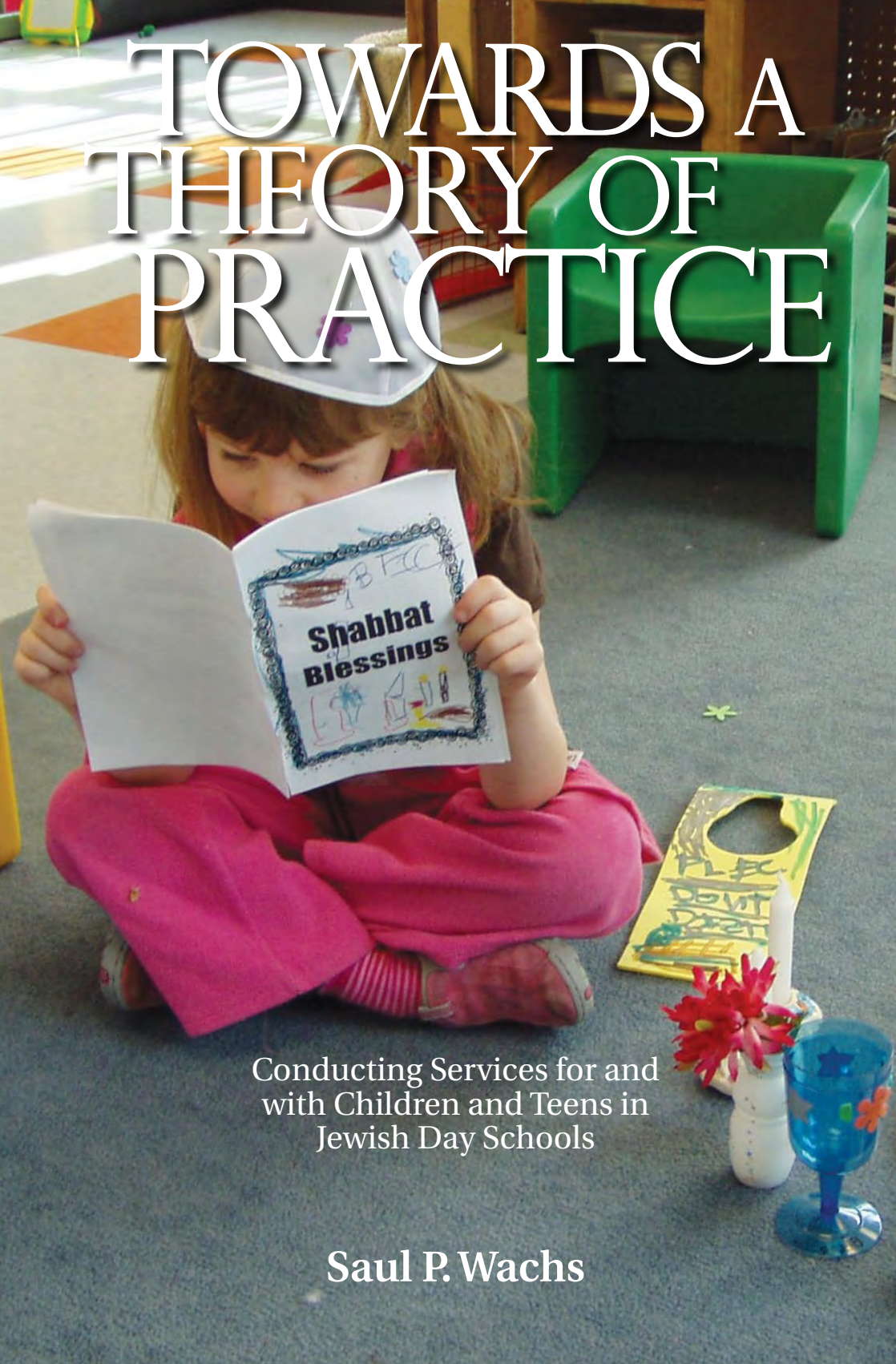


TOWARDS A THEORY OF PRACTICE



Conducting Services for and
with Children and Teens in
Jewish Day Schools

Saul P. Wachs

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The
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This paper is based on a presentation by Dr. Wachs at the Solomon Schechter Day School Association Professionals Conference in January 2008. The conference, which took place at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Las Vegas, was devoted to the spirituality of students and day school professionals.

Dr. Wachs here offers a comprehensive and thought-provoking framework for developing the spiritual dimension of *tefillah*—a framework that can inform the practice not only of Schechter schools, but all who hope to initiate students into Jewish spiritual life.

The Solomon Schechter Day School Association offers this booklet as part of its vision of assisting Jewish days schools to be places of *אהבת תורה* *ahavat torah* and *יראת שמים* *yirat shamayim*.

A WORD ON THE DESIGN

This book was designed to be used as a text, incorporating wide margins to facilitate notations. Several blank pages were placed at the end of the book for additional notes.

The entire text was set in 12 point Utopia Regular, Italic, Semibold, and Bold.

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The Trap

During the past 27 years, acting as a consultant, I have had the privilege of observing *tefillot* in day schools, most of which have been affiliated with the Solomon Schechter Day School Association.

In these schools, a typical pattern emerged. In the younger classes, the pupils seem to enjoy *tefillot* but as they grow, enthusiasm wanes and many of them start to disconnect emotionally and eventually, some “act out” to show their disengagement from public worship. I have become convinced that the problem has to do with what was not done when the pupils were young and in the process of forming a basic set of attitudes towards *tefillah*. When I observed how teachers approached prayer in the younger classes, what emerged consistently was a pattern of *tefillah* as an exercise in skills and nothing more.



Omek–Depth

**When *tefillah* consists of skills and little more,
there comes a time when, for many pupils,
skills no longer reinforce themselves**

I believe that many teachers of young children reason that: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

I would suggest that this is a mistake and that our strategy should be: “Fix it before it breaks.”

The key is *omek*, depth. I believe that every service should have some element of *omek*. How do we nurture *omek*? There are many ways. Let me share some good practices which I have observed. The teacher will:

- Tell a story.
- Share a personal message.
- Read a newspaper clipping.
- Read a poem.
- Introduce a creative prayer.
- Engage in a meditation — either a walking meditation or one standing or sitting in place.
- Expect pupils to enter the *Beit Keneset* in silence.
- Play music (either recorded or instrumental).
- Have a class that serves as a choir and sings soothing music as the students enter the prayer space.
- Lead a Tai Chi exercise before the service.
- Greet pupils at the entrance of the classroom with a *Sefer Torah*.
- Greet each pupil and shake hands with words of welcome at the start of the day.

In a small school, the group meets outside of the *Beit Keneset* and pupils and teachers share significant information about what is happening to them. Afterwards, older pupils invite younger pupils to sit with them and help them find their way through the service. There is a caring community.

Our best prayers often take place when we pray with those about whom we care.

A GANTEACHER comes into the room with a flower. He explains to the pupils

that he is very excited because the flower is unusual and he found it because he walked to school instead of riding his bike. He invites the pupils to share. Some share worry. One shares anger because of what happened the day before in the class between him and another child. One child, very excited, says that her mother is bringing her new baby home from the hospital. I sense that the pupils are moving closer to each other. When the *tefillah* starts it feels like a *ḥassidic shtiebel*.

I AM VISITING a school in New Milford, New Jersey. The teacher is an Israeli who had never been in a synagogue before coming to the United States. She is talented and has participated in ongoing seminars and workshops (*see below*). The room has a *pinat kodesh* which includes candle sticks on a covered table, pictures of Jerusalem and an *aron kodesh* which contains a small *sefer Torah*. The pupils are sitting in their seats. The teacher puts on lovely, soothing music. The pupils take this as a signal to take their *siddurim* to the area surrounding the *pinat kodesh*. A period of *hitbodedut* (personal meditation) ensues. The class sings a *niggun* and then the actual service begins. It ranges from fast to slow melodies. A second period of *hitbodedut* follows *Adon Olam*. Some pupils stand, some sit. Afterwards, the teacher speaks.



“Today, I was thinking of my sister. She is a soldier in the Israeli army. She is in Gaza. I asked God to take care of my sister. I miss her terribly.” She then invites the pupils to share their thoughts. Three do. They focus on their prayers. There is a sense of *omek*.

I AM VISITING a *gan* class in Worcester Massachusetts. The Gulf War is raging. The pupils have learned a lot of prayers. It is a Thursday and the students take out the small *sefer Torah* from the *aron ha’kodesh* and proceed to dance with it. (They celebrate “*Simḥat Torah*” every week.) Towards the end of the service, the teacher says: “It is time for our special prayer.” The pupils and the adults close their eyes. After a period of time, the service resumes and ends with *Adon Olam*. The teacher asks: “Does anyone wish to share?” A child says, “I asked God to take care of my neighbor Mr....” Another says, “I asked God not to make my Daddy go to war.”

I believe that sometimes, the issue is not “where is God” but rather, “when is God.” I feel that God was there, then. I sense that God is in the room.

In a small school in Cape Town, South Africa, every Friday, someone (usually an adult) stands up and speaks about “what X means to me.” For example: what being a woman means to me; what being a teacher means to me; what being a Jew means to

me; what being a South African means to me; what being an Israeli means to me; what the Torah means to me; and what this school means to me.

I am struck by the respect shown by the listeners. “Words that come from the heart enter the heart.” The pupils know that they are being invited to listen as someone shares deep feelings.

In a school in the South, sixth graders gather for *shaharit*. They chant *Birkhot ha'Shahar*. The teacher asks: “Is there anyone here who has had an experience this week when you might have wanted to say one of these *berakhot*?” Silence ensues. The pupils look at the *berakhot*. She waits patiently. A boy raises his hand. “I was playing soccer this week,” he says, “practice ended late and it was dark. On the way home, I almost fell into a sink hole. I could have broken a leg.” “Which *berakhah* were you thinking of,” asks the teacher. “*Ha'mekhin mitzadei gaver*,” he answers. “Would you like to say it?” she asks. He recites the *berakhah* and everyone answers “*amen*.”



Set-Inductions: Creating a Set for Prayer

The time of *tefillah* can and should be the deepest time of the day.

No runner runs without warming up. No athlete goes into action without warming up. We are interested in nurturing spiritual athletes. Why should we suppose that people can press a button and shift into a spiritual mode?

חֲסִידִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ שׁוֹהִים שָׁעָה אַחַת
וּמִתְפַּלְלִים כְּדֵי שְׂיִכְוֹנוּ לִיבָם לְאַבְיָהֶם שְׁבַע שָׁמַיִם
“The pious ones of old would pause for an hour and then recite the *Amidah* in order to focus their hearts on their Father in Heaven.”
(*Mishnah Berakhot*, Chapter 5:1)

At that time, many prayed at sunrise and in the open air. Commenting on this Mishnaic statement, the author of the “*Peri Megadim*” writes that one hour is the time it takes to recite the sections of the *Shaharit* that precede the *Amidah* (*Eshel Avraham* 93:1). If our ancestors, praying outside, at sunrise, felt the need to warm up, how much the more so do we, who pray inside at a later hour, need to do so?

The examples cited in the section above are exemplars of depth that can also be used as set-inductions. What happens before the service, during the service and after it, has to be part of the curriculum of prayer.



Kedushah and Yofi

הַשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לַה' בְּהַדְרַת קִדְּשׁ

“Worship God in the beauty of holiness.” (Psalm 29)

Beauty directs us to holiness; the esthetic points to the transcendent. The physical environment affects our mood and it affects our readiness to pray. I suspect that many of us sense that when we *daven Minḥah* overlooking a mountain. We are moved by beauty. The natural environment envelops us in creation and connects us to the Creator.

The arts, in general, heighten our awareness of creation. The arts are represented in many ways in the act of *tefillah*—dance, poetry and music. When artistic elements are part of prayer, they touch deep feelings and emotions that express a universal human longing for connection to the sublime and the infinite. We long for an attachment to the Creator: esthetics transforms our relationship to God.

The regal choreography of the Torah service and the pageantry with which it is executed point to God’s role as *Melekh ha’Olam*. The poetry of the psalmists evokes the beauty of nature. We are reminded of God’s role as the Master Painter and the Author of history. Music and poetry lift us to heights that connect us to the voice of God (e. g. Psalm 29). Rhythms, sounds and cadences touch us deeply as they express what cannot be adequately articulated in words.



Dance

כָּל עֲצָמֹתַי תִּאמְרָנָה ה' מִי כָמוֹךָ

“All my bones exclaim: God who is like you?” (Psalm 35:10)

“I shall praise you with all my limbs. I bow my head as I pray with the hairs of my head, with my neck ...”

(*Midrash Tehillim* 35:2)

We open the palm of our hands as we say:

פּוֹתַח אֶת יָדְךָ וּמְשַׁבֵּיעַ לְכֹל חַי רִצּוֹן

“You open Your hand, and Your favor sustains all the living.” (Psalm 145:16)

We touch the arm and the head as we recite sections of “*ve’Ahavta*.” We bow, we sway, we move our bodies, we carry the Torah, and we wave the *lulav*. Psalm 150 seems to tell us that dance was once part of worship. *Tefillah* can be a kinesthetic experience.

Wrapping our bodies in *tallit* and/or *tefillin* prepares us physically and mentally for *tefillah*. We need to be fully present in the moment, in mind and in body, to truly focus our attention in worship. Our bodies reflect a non-verbal expression of awe in the presence of the Divine. Dance is now part of the *Shabbat* services of some synagogues and *havurot*. It is to be found in the daily services of some of our youngest pupils. We need to recognize that many of our pupils, including the oldest, find physical expression to be exhilarating and spiritual.



Music

Our fidelity to *nosah* (the traditional musical modes and motifs) in our prayers and biblical cantillation connects us vertically to our ancestors who faithfully preserved the musical modes and motifs that enable us to recognize the move from section to section of the service and the distinctiveness of weekday, *Shabbat* and Festival liturgy. Many of the texts do not change from day to day, but the music does. *Nosah* connects us horizontally to Jews around the world who share our heritage. When we travel and visit synagogues in other places, we sense strongly this connection.

Rhythmic chanting or reading of the prayers can also touch us deeply. I have often been struck by the phenomenon of middle and high school students becoming more alert and focused when the *Amidah* is chanted on weekdays in the Post-*Haftarah* mode. This melody is so-named by Jewish musicologists because it is based on the melody used to chant the *berakhot* following the *Haftarah*. This part of the service is often rhythmically chanted. This seems to awaken in the pupils even more motivation to chant.



Poetry

Sefer Tehillim, the Book of Psalms, contains some of the most magnificent poetry ever written. These words have inspired believers all over the world. Others have

found in it a richness of human expression that is inspiring. Our students have a right to be exposed to this literary treasury. Whether in class or at services, the words of praise, petition, thanksgiving and confession that inform *Sefer Tehillim* should be part of the culture of our schools. We should never have to be ashamed by some version of the story of that Jewish college student who took a course that included Psalms and remarked: “It’s a pity that Jews don’t write poetry like that.”



The Visual Arts

The visual arts should also be reflected in our prayers. The rhythms of color, light and space create harmonies which, like music and poetry, contribute to our openness to the sublime. To create spaces in schools conducive to prayer is a challenge in multi-purpose rooms, be they classrooms, lunch rooms or auditoriums. Different solutions to this problem are to be found in a number of our schools. Teachers have created *pinot kodesh*, places in their rooms that mark that area as special. Large, multi-purpose rooms have been enhanced during *tefillot* through portable murals or decorative mobiles suspended from the ceiling or hung on the walls. These places have been decorated with ritual objects, pictures, murals, flowers, plants. They have included the work of pupils. The beauty of space, like time and sound is very powerful.



Creativity as an Enhancement of the Service

The area of the aesthetic includes the aural. We are moved by beauty and we also appreciate competence. When a *sheliaḥ tzibbur* is incompetent, *kavannah* is much harder to achieve. A competent *sheliaḥ tzibbur* can inspire confidence, connection and participation. An uncertain or indifferent *sheliaḥ tzibbur* can destroy a service.

Many years ago, I was asked to be the music counselor at Camp Ramah in Canada. The camp sponsored a *zimriyah* early in the summer. Each *edah*, division, prepared songs in various categories. One of the categories was *shirei kodesh*.

I asked each *edah* to create a new melody for one of the texts in the *siddur*. A girl in the *makhon* (the oldest *edah*), wrote a melody for “*shirah ḥadashah shibeḥu ge’ulim*.” As one might expect, the campers sang that song and all of their chosen songs with a lot of feeling. But this time there was a fringe benefit or “*tosefet berakhah*.” For the rest of the summer, every day, when the *makhon* davened *Shaharit*, no matter how tired they were, no matter what their mood happened to be, they sang that text with feeling and depth. It was their creation. It enlarged their feeling of group cohesiveness. Interestingly, at the conclusion of the summer, campers and counselors took that melody back home and it became a staple of some of the synagogues and *havurot* in Toronto.

Tefillah can become a focus of the various arts programs of our schools and the products can enrich the physical and spiritual settings in which we try to connect with the transcendent. We need to encourage our students to create art, poetry, music and body movements that will make the experience of prayer deep and memorable.

Any visitor to the synagogues of Prague or the great Jewish museums of Israel and the Diaspora is struck by the passion for Jewish life and the depth of religious expression that are revealed in the arts. This passion is to be found in the music, theatre and crafts created by past generations. The prayer service must reflect this connection of the arts and worship.

We long for an attachment to the Creator.
Aesthetics transforms our relationship to God.



Intellectual Preparation for Prayer

The *siddur* is a censored document. The liturgy, as Solomon Schechter pointed out, was protected from the beginning against heresy. The Talmud contains records of debates over the wording of *berakhot*. I personally believe that *Hazal* (the rabbis who shaped what we call Judaism) saw in prayer an opportunity to teach the common folk the basic beliefs, values and ideas of the Pharisees.

In the first four of the books of the Torah, when there is prayer, it most often can be characterized as spontaneous prayer. It is what Abraham Joshua Heschel called, “The prayer of expression.” On the other hand, *Sefer Devarim* contains liturgies, the

intent of which seems to be pedagogical. According to Moshe Greenberg, a great Bible scholar, the Israelites learned the main beliefs of Israelite religion through the liturgies of the *bikkurim*, *ma’aser sheni*, and other liturgical formulations. These liturgies seem to have been a model for the *hakhamim* of Yavneh, who laid down the foundations for Jewish worship after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Liturgy is, perhaps, the clearest indicator of the belief system of the *hakhamim*, i.e. the rabbis who created Judaism.

When a new movement develops (Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist) and it reaches a point where it is ready to define itself in distinction to other movements, it issues its own liturgy. An examination of the newest Reform *Siddur*—*Mishkan Tefillah*—in comparison with “Gates of Prayer” and, even more so, of previous editions of the Union Prayer Book tells us a great deal about how that movement is evolving.

I am convinced that one of the reasons that middle and high school pupils develop negative attitudes towards *tefillah* is that they lack any cognitive preparation for prayer. What irony! We know that what is written carefully can be analyzed, and students can discover its postulates. Here are a set of words edited with exquisite care, and many or most people who open the book barely look at the words. The school has to recognize that not understanding the meaning of the words is a serious barrier to *kavannah*.

Questionnaires that I distributed in three schools, each in a different part of the country, reveal that pupils feel differently about a prayer with which they can make an intellectual connection than one where they cannot decipher the meaning of the words.



Making room for *Iyyun Tefillah* in the Curriculum

When I was a boy growing up in Philadelphia, there were three five-day-a-week Jewish supplementary school systems. In each of these, no one spoke about God and no one prayed. They were focused exclusively on the ethnic and cultural aspects of Jewish civilization—*Yiddishkeit*—and had no place for religion in their programs. What is left of those systems today is a Sunday school. At that time there were at least a hundred thousand passionate Jews who did not pray in synagogues but expressed their identification with and love of the Jewish people through Yiddish and Hebrew and a devotion to its manifestation in theatre, dance, song and poetry. Today, for a variety of reasons, Jews who self-define as “just Jewish” in surveys that ask for an ideological self-definition score lowest on just about every index of Jewish behavior. A Jewish identity that was nurtured by ethnic connections and culture alone has proven to be difficult to transmit without the daily and weekly rituals of the calendar and the life-cycle. Given the attrition of ethnicity as a prime form of identity in North America, I believe that the Jews who are most likely to have Jewish grandchildren are those who have a connection to the rituals of the

home, as well as the *siddur*, prayer and the synagogue. (See on this, Jonathan Sarna, “The Rise and Fall and Rebirth of Secular Judaism,” *Contemplate*, Issue IV, 2007, pp.4-13.) Sarna questions whether secular Judaism can meet the challenge of intermarriage and keep Jews Jewish.)

In our times, I believe connection to the Jewish people is most likely to be formed when an individual has the skills necessary to participate in a service, has positive memories of prayer as a time of depth, and has the intellectual preparation requisite to derive personal meaning from engagement with the words of the *siddur* and the *mahzor*. Without the last of these, there is a danger that *tefillah* will be seen as “mumbo-jumbo,” the repetition of meaningless words and phrases; an exercise in futility.

This argues for making a place for *iyyun tefillah*, the study of prayer, in our curricula. Let me differentiate between *iyyun tefillah* and *bei'ur tefillah*. *Bei'ur tefillah*, explaining the prayer, takes place when a teacher tells the pupils what a prayer means. *Iyyun tefillah* refers to a process wherein teacher and pupils search together for meanings that are stated or implied in the text. Both have value, but it is *iyyun tefillah* that seems to most engage the minds and hearts of the pupils. When people bring an intellectual preparation to the act of davening, it can make a difference. I know that school curricula are already packed but I believe that if the *siddur* is the Jewish book that people are most likely to encounter as adults, it behooves us to make sure that they have the skills and competencies necessary to make that encounter meaningful. Some are best encountered at a specific age.



Focusing the Attention of Middle School Pupils on Life-Cycle Liturgy

A curriculum for *iyyun tefillah* would require spiral revisitation of major prayers, in increasing depth. Major prayer units such as *Keri'at Shema u'Virkhotekha*, the *Amidah*, and *Birkat ha-Mazon* should be studied in more than one year. In addition, I recommend making the study of lifecycle prayers and rites a focal point of the middle school curriculum. The concreteness of these ceremonies and the proximity of the *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* make it likely that pupils will approach that study with intellectual curiosity.

In sum, *tefillah* can be powerful when and if we bring to it intellectual and emotional readiness and a sensitivity to developmental appropriateness.



Hebrew

Questionnaires administered in schools in the East, Midwest and West reveal that pupils feel differently about prayers which they understand the meaning of and those which they do not understand. They are not meaningful.

In many schools, the Hebrew language curriculum is not connected to the vocabulary of the *siddur*. Aharon Ben Natan wrote a doctoral dissertation in the 1950s in which he identified the frequency with which words appear in the liturgy. I believe that we have to find a way to teach those words, together with

the main grammatical constructions found in the *siddur*.

When a prayer is studied and its vocabulary is acquired, pupils will approach prayer, not as “mumbo jumbo” but as meaningful communication. We can begin with the youngest children by teaching the names of the *tashmishei kedushah* and the *tashmishei mitzvah* (the ritual objects) and the untranslatable Hebrew value concepts which are the building blocks of rabbinic thought

Some examples of these include *kedushah*, *derekh eretz*, *tzedakah*, *talmud torah*, *nibbul peh*, etc. I am excited by my observation and teaching of children in the early childhood programs of the day school that uses new, age-appropriate bi-lingual programs. This opens new horizons of possible achievement as the very young acquire a rich vocabulary and “swim in the sea of Hebrew language.”



The Role of General Studies Teachers

I want to share a few thoughts about the role that general studies teachers can play in developing and enhancing a comprehensive approach to prayer in the school. I would like to advocate three ways in which teachers of language and literature can support this work. First, they can encourage their pupils to write creative prayers in English. This, of course, can be done by Hebrew language teachers as well. These personal prayers can then be used to enhance the prayer service. Second, they can apply the teaching of literary, poetic and rhetorical analysis

to prayers. Third, they can compare poems and prayers that share the same theme. For example, they can compare and contrast a love sonnet with *Ahavah Rabbah*.

In Schechter schools in northern New Jersey, science teachers have provided lists of phenomena that illustrate the idea of “contingency.” For example, how would our lives be affected if the sun were closer or further from the earth? If the earth did not rotate? If ice did not float? The idea of contingency complements statements in the *siddur* about how God provides the conditions that make life possible which, if altered, would affect us drastically. Since, in prayer, we are reminded of our own responsibilities as God’s partners, the prayers that describe God’s role in nature carry a message of social import as well. What we praise, we are to admire and emulate.

Art teachers can help teachers and pupils create *pinot kodesh* that make prayer spaces more beautiful. Music teachers can include musical settings of prayers in their curricula.

In Philadelphia, a physical education teacher was made principal of one of the branches. She studied and taught *birkat asher yatzar et ha’adam*, the blessing for God having fashioned the human body, using her expertise to illustrate the “wisdom of the body.” The fact that she is not Jewish might have made the impact on the pupils particularly powerful.

When the text of a *berakhah* is found in a science lab, and when the teachers mentioned above include *tefillah* in their work, the notion of integration, which is one of the mantras in Schechter schools, becomes strengthened. I personally believe that every class,

irrespective of its content should begin with *birkat la'asok bedivrei Torah*. In one of his books, Rabbi Louis Finkelstein wrote that whenever we study anything with the goal of understanding God's world and mending it, we are studying Torah.

These recommendations imply that all teachers should be present at large school services. The pupils see everything and note the absence of their general studies teachers, which delivers a message that undercuts the fulfillment of the mission of the school.



The Role of the Teacher in Davening

The last *minyan* in many large communities, including mine, is at the local *yeshivah*. It is a beautiful *minyan*. One enters the *beit midrash* to the sound of disputation and a degree of competition. Then the *Rebbei'im* sit across the front of the room facing the students and a slow, very serious davening ensues. It is a "healing ritual" which symbolizes the values of the *yeshivah* and re-unites the community. The sounds of prayer, voiced and silent, replace noise, disputation, and competition. It might be worth trying out the idea of ending the day at our schools with *Minḥah* to see if it creates a similar sense of coming together and celebrating the end of a productive day of "work."

In too many of our schools, the teachers function as police people. Sometimes in class, a teacher will correct Hebrew mistakes, made by the *sheliḥat tzibbur*, the one who leads the congregation in prayer. In the worst case scenario, teachers take roll, talk,

drink coffee and engage in other behaviors that signal to the pupils, "This is for you, not for me." The role of the teacher must be to daven, to be a model davener. This is essential for creating the proper environment. I suggest that the staff sit in front of the room when there is large group davening so they can model for the pupils.

Of course there might well be a student whose behavior is inappropriate. Such a pupil can be approached after the service and told, "The school gives us this time to prepare ourselves for the day. I appreciate this 'window in time.' You made it hard for me to pray and that's not fair." When we act as police people, we set up an inter-generational conflict, but young people understand the concept of fairness and respond to it. If a particular pupil behaves inappropriately day after day, that student can be told that he or she will not be permitted to be present during the davening for a period of time. I believe that the pupil will not enjoy being excluded from the group.

I observed another model at the Orthodox Ramaz Upper School in Manhattan many years ago. It was the establishment of an *epikorus minyan* (literally a *minyan* for non-believers) which was available to those who found it difficult to connect with *tefillah be'tzibbur*. I sat in one day. The teacher was excellent. He facilitated a discussion of what makes liturgical prayer a challenge. The kids felt safe and spoke with candor. They felt that they were being taken seriously. Respect engendered respect. My close friend Noam Shudofsky, *zikhrono li'verakhah*,

told me that over the course of the year, this *minyán* would probably shrink and even disappear as pupils felt better able to join their friends at one of the other *minyanim*.



Davening Skills : Graduating from “Junior Congregation”

In many schools, the pupils learn a *kitzur*, an abridged version of the service and repeat it day after day and year after year. They experience no sense of growth. Worse, they are often unprepared to participate in or lead a service in the local Conservative synagogue. When they have occasion to *daven* in a more traditional service, they feel uncomfortable and even embarrassed. People who cannot participate actively in *tefillah be'tzibbur* are less likely to attend synagogue services.

In order to allow for growth in literacy, it is advisable to develop alternative versions of the service. This allows for the introduction of new prayer texts without making the service too long. Thus, a school might have a rotating A—B—C service. If there is a desire to introduce a new psalm in *Pesukei de'Zimrah*, the service might start with *Barukh she'Amar* instead of *Birkhot ha'Shaḥar*. If the *Amidah* is to be repeated, the service can start with *Barekhu* etc. The key is for the pupil to feel that he or she is constantly learning new skills and growing towards a form of worship that is intended for adults in the Jewish community.

A word about learning the *Amidah* is in order. Everyone has a preferred modality of learning. In any group, some will find it easiest to learn aurally. When texts are never read or chanted aloud, it is very likely that at least some of the pupils will not be able to read them or will read them incorrectly. (I've noticed that students in *sefardi* schools seem to have stronger liturgical skills, perhaps because in the *sefardi* service, everything is chanted aloud.)



Exit Skills

It is important for the school to create a set of exit skills for graduates and to establish expectations for the mastery of these skills, grade by grade. I have never been the Head of a day school, but I did lead Conservative congregational schools for twenty-two years. In these schools (one of which offered six hours of formal weekly study and the other, seven hours,) graduates of the elementary school, could act as *shelihei tzibbur* for all services for *Ḥol*, *Shabbat*, as well as *Hallel*, and home rituals. Most continued into the high school and they were able to add the *Amidot* for *Shalosh Regalim*. When the school year opened in the month of *Elul*, they even learned parts of the service for the *Yamim Nora'im*.

The exit skills should be tested and grades assigned and recorded. In my congregational schools we met three fundamental goals:

- First, the schools had a focused *tefillah* curriculum.
- Second, there was a prayer service, every time a class met.
- Third, I adapted a model from my own Jewish education, the confirmation class cantata.

In preparation for confirmation, my class devoted many hours over a concentrated period of time to learning a cantata. We were willing to do this because there was to be an impressive *pe'ulat sikkum*, summary activity. Confirmation meant flowers for the girls, robes for us, and a big turnout of family and members of the community as well as food served after the service. In retrospect, I think it was not the best way to utilize that opportunity for learning since we performed the cantata once and most of us probably never had any contact with it again.

In time, I decided to adapt the model. Each grade was assigned a specific liturgical unit to master by intensive effort. It culminated in a *pe'ulat sikkum*. For example, *Kitah Hey* learned the *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Arvit le'Shabbat* service. *Kitah Vav* mastered the complete *Shaharit le'Hol*. In each case, the pupils chose a theme, added an overlay of original poetry and art (and in one instance, new music) and performed the service before family, congregational leaders and members.

I have seen instances of this concept in our Schechter schools. The Philadelphia schools start graduation with *Arvit*. One year, the pupils in the middle school of the Charles E. Smith School, Rockville, MD, refurbished their prayer space.

They held the dedication on *Rosh Hodesh* and led a complete service for parents, board members, rabbis, and school leaders. These are examples of how the skill curriculum can grow.



Halakhah: Hilkhot Tefillah

Our claim to be distinctive among the non-Orthodox movements is partially rooted in our commitment to take *halakhah* seriously. When our rhetoric is consistently *parvedik*, lukewarm, we run the risk that our claim will not be taken seriously.

No (Jewish) parent ever said to a child: “Some people brush their teeth in the morning and others do not. What do you want to do?” Our pupils know that when something is important, one strives to do it well and in some cases, with precision. This extends to any skill, be it holding a baseball bat or crocheting. I believe that when we do not seek to inculcate a commitment to accuracy, we risk the pupil concluding that what we teach is not that important.

The time to begin this process is with the very young. They can be taught how to handle our ritual objects—*tashmishi kedushah* and *tashmishi mitzvah* appropriately. When I see pupils talking to each other while putting on *tefillin* or tossing a *siddur* as if it was a ball, I know that this learning did not take place. The traditional body-language—bowing, standing at attention during the *Amidah*, taking steps backward before and after the *Amidah*, covering the eyes during

the first *pasuk* of *Keri'at Shema*—all of these exemplify treating *halakhah* seriously.



Kavannot:* A Creative Enrichment of *Tefillah

There is a rich tradition of *Piyyut* (non-statutory prayer) and *Kavannot* (personal prayers) in Judaism. While I am a strong advocate of trying to ensure that our pupils can participate in, and lead services of traditional liturgy, I also see much value in encouraging our pupils to create prayers to enhance worship. As noted above, this creative work can be part of class work or based on the personal experience of the student. In our work at Tifereth Israel, the pilot school of the Melton Research Center in Columbus, Ohio, we created an expectation that each pupil would have at least one opportunity every year to offer a creative prayer as part of the *davening*. These were always in English, but I can easily see how, in a day school, such creative writing could emerge from either side of the curriculum.



Ownership

Teens who feel that they are seriously involved in decisions about a service are more likely to respect the dignity of the service. I observed two teen services in New Jersey one after the other. Both took place in the same room. Many of the teens seemed uninvolved in the first service while the second



service engaged the attention and elicited the active participation of the group. The first was conducted by a *hazzan* while the second was completely conducted by the students. They acted as *shelihei tzibbur*, *ba'alei keriah*, gave a *devar tefillah* and a *devar Torah*, and served as *gabbaim*. In short, the students took responsibility for the service. The school Head and several teachers were present at both services as congregants but the second service belonged to the pupils. In Pittsburgh, an active *va'ad tefillah* greatly improved the middle school service. I saw the change through two visits, one before and one after the activation of the group.



Altering the Variables of Prayer

Let me assert a basic principle of practice. Every time a variable of the service is altered, consciousness is raised.

When we read what is usually sung; when we reverse the role of *sheliaḥ tzibbur* and the *tzibbur* in the chanting or reading of *Ashrei*, Psalm 145; when we chant in English (in *Nosah*); when we do aloud what is usually done silently; we raise consciousness. When we change the place or the time, the language or the music of prayer, and when we occasionally offer the option of a gender-separated service, we increase the possibilities for a more powerful experience.

The first page of the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* on January 2007, described a prayer experience at the national conclave of the youth of the Union for Reform Judaism. Apparently, there

were multiple options for worship and the most “successful” of these was an all-boys *minyán*. A rabbi was quoted as saying that he believes that teen age boys perhaps have a different natural style of prayer than girls. I have observed gender-separated *minyanim* in Albany, Rockville, Maryland, and Merion Station, Pa. All were powerful. In Albany, the girls got up during the singing of Psalm 150 and began dancing around the room. I am confident that this would not have happened had there been boys in the room.



Creating and Utilizing Plausibility Structures

If we are to convince our pupils that prayer is valuable and has a place in the “real world,” it is important that the pupils experience prayer outside of the classroom and the school. Taking a class to a *beit evel*, a house of mourning, or a *beit avot*, a home for the elderly, can provide these experiences. Another idea worth considering is to allow pupils in the oldest grade to engage in *tefillat yahid*, praying alone.

There’s a lesson to be derived from a personal experience of mine at the reunion of Camp Ramah in Connecticut, where many years ago, I served as the *Rosh Edah* of the youngest division. At the reunion, I encountered a girl from the *Edah*. I asked if she was planning to come back to camp the next summer. She said she would. When I asked what she liked best about camp, she told me that it was *havdalah*. She particularly liked the way

we did *havdalah*, which was conducted around a swimming pool. When I asked if she did *havdalah* at home, she said that she would like to but that it was impossible. When I asked why, she replied: “We don’t have a swimming pool!” The following summers, each bunk did *havdalah* in the cabin.

On one level, a test of the effectiveness of *tefillah* in the school might be what the pupil does on the first day of vacation. If the pupil never has the opportunity to pray alone, doing so at home becomes less plausible.



Teenagers Need Options

More and more of our schools have found it is a good idea to offer more than one option for *minyán* in the middle school. For example, in Newton, Massachusetts, during a visit, I learned that twice a week, students in the middle school rotate between a series of options. (Some schools mandate the process; others allow students to make choices.) The group I observed had an abbreviated service, followed by a workshop in how to prepare a *De’var Torah*. A girl, whose *bat mitzvah* celebration was scheduled for *Parashat be’Shalah* presented a draft of her talk. The teacher had been teaching the class the method of “*al tikrei*” in which a word is deliberately altered to make a point. The girl said: “*Al tikrei yam suf ela yam sof–sof ha’avdut, sof ha’Miztrim.*” (Do not say “the Sea of Reeds” but rather the “Sea of Endings”—the end of slavery, the end of the (army of) Egyptians. The pupils were motivated and it was clear that this girl had learned

a valuable skill for anyone who wishes to walk in the footsteps of *hazal*.



***Madu’a and Lamah:* a rationale for prayer**

As we all know, Hebrew has two words for “why” and they are not the same. *Madu’a* (why) seeks a cause; *Lamah* seeks meaning and purpose. The *madu’a* of *tefillah* in our schools is perfectly clear to the pupils. It is mandated! The *lamah* of *tefillah* is not always clear to them. Too often, I have heard from pupils that they do not really understand the purpose and meaning of prayer; how it can enrich their lives and create a set for the day or cap it. Personal testimony offered by pupils, teachers, administrators, staff, parents, and others can be impressive.

Pupils should understand that praying is a distinctively human activity. We do not only live in the present, we have memory and can look to the future. We are not locked into instinctual patterns. We can change our ways of thinking and behaving. Students need to know something about the distinctive contributions of different types of prayer. They should see thanksgiving, *hoda’ot*, as a way of getting in touch with what they have. They should understand that the *bakkashot*, petitions, of prayer validate our status as people with legitimate needs; with our vulnerability. *Bakkashot* also serve to help us to distinguish between real needs and artificial needs foisted on us by the market place. Finally, reciting *bakkashot*

can help us to be more responsive to those who come to us for help.

In the prayers of praise, students should see the characteristics that we are being taught to admire and to emulate. A culture ascribes its highest values to its model and our model is God. When we say that God is the Creator, we are making a statement about creativity. When the *siddur* says that God is a teacher, it is making a statement about the dignity of teaching.

Daily *tefillah* can offer an opportunity to breathe, to take stock and to prepare as only humans can prepare for the challenges and opportunities of a new day. We owe our pupils the opportunity to think about a defensible rationale for daily prayer. The least that we should settle for is that they see it as a potentially useful enrichment of the day.



Making *Tefillah* a Part of the Day

Heyu zerizim le'mitzvah, grasp the teachable moment, is a principle of sound education. There are many *berakhot* that respond to special moments. Opportunities for teaching *berakhot* or other liturgical formulations appear naturally every day: good news and bad news; meeting a great Jewish scholar or one who is eminent in some other field; viewing the first buds of spring; encountering beauty. When every class starts with a *berakhah*; when opportunities to pray are utilized throughout the day; *tefillah* ceases to be an isolated activity and becomes an organic part of a school culture.





Creating a Culture of Change

The change for which I am advocating will mean a change in the place of prayer in the school culture. This kind of change has curricular implications. *Siddur* study, *iyyun tefillah*, will be a necessary component in a serious effort to make prayer meaningful. Teachers will have to be supported to feel comfortable with open questions. Meeting the challenge for encouraging such questioning means that teachers are willing to teach in a situation with open perimeters. This entails a certain degree of loss of control.

I have been involved in efforts to change the culture of two day schools and I believe that such work involves an ongoing process with the faculty. I take it as axiomatic that a person has to come to terms with something first as a human being and only then can the person be ready to do so as a professional.

The model which I use in my work calls for in-school-time for faculty seminars and workshops.

If this is not possible, then teachers should be compensated for their after-school time. It is necessary that an administrator participate in order to signal that the effort is a priority. If the school leader's presence is going to have power, the administrator needs to participate as a peer. When an administrator, in the spirit of "*aharai*" ("after me!") shares a theological or *halakhic* problem that he/she is grappling with, it becomes a lot easier for a teacher to do the same.

The seminars include the study of prayer. In the first stage, I raise theological issues. I emphasize the idea that they are not expected to know the answer to deep questions that defy easy answers. I have been told by many teachers that they find this idea "liberating." Sharing theological issues and talking about them in the spirit of shared, open-ended questions contributes to strengthening the sense of being part of a learning community. It is an important and satisfying cognitive-emotional experience. It strengthens personal links between the participants.

The second stage calls for the sharing of lesson plans. I have used plans that were prepared for the *Teaching Guide for Gan and Alef Class*, published by the United Synagogue Department of Education for Solomon Schechter Schools. I have also utilized other lesson plans that have been prepared for older classes. Some of these are in English; others in Hebrew. The process involves teachers critiquing and improving these plans.

The third stage includes my teaching model classes of children and teens so that the teachers can see the plans *in vivo*. The plans have been further improved through the suggestions of the observers.

The fourth stage calls for teachers to try out the plans and report what took place. The final stage has teachers teaching in front of their peers. In some instances, this is a major indicator of a cultural change.

A word about Israeli teachers is in order. Because of our commitment to teaching Hebrew as a living

language, many of our Schechter schools have engaged Israeli teachers to teach Jewish studies. Many of them were educated in the *beit sefer mamlakhti* (the Israeli State Public schools), about which it is said these days, that the apex of Jewish studies is in the Gan (!)

What is meant is that what is taught in the Gan is often what is remembered. In the latter grades, the schools frequently do not expand the students' understanding of historical and other factors that might lead to a more mature understanding of Judaism.

Many of these teachers with whom I have worked were taught Orthodox notions about the holidays and *halakhot*. They do not believe these ideas but they feel that they must continue to teach them. Part of my work has been to teach them how Conservative scholars view texts—*sifrei kodesh*—and how we approach tradition. Let me illustrate by pointing to *Hanukkah*. Many of the teachers view the holiday purely in terms of the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greeks. The idea of a struggle between the Hellenizers and those who opposed them in a “civil war” to preserve the future of Judaism is new to them. They do not know that while the rabbis respected aspects of Greek philosophy, even incorporating Greek forms of hermeneutic analysis, they were also sensitive to the danger of acculturation ending in assimilation. Since this is an ongoing struggle for any minority, including American Jews, teachers often miss an opportunity to make the holiday a lot

more important than it being merely a celebration with *latkes* and *dreidles*. When Israeli teachers are exposed to this kind of analysis, they understand the importance of history in making sense out of our traditions. The response of the teachers has been very encouraging. I have encountered very little negativity. Teachers who are remaining in the Diaspora and raising their own children turn out to be opened to re-evaluating tradition.



Summary

I have never encountered a school Head who denigrated the importance of *tefillah*.

Yet, the place of prayer varies greatly from one Jewish day school to another. In some places, prayer is reduced to a skill unaccompanied by either a rationale or rich affect. In other places, I've observed and anticipated in real efforts to teach the skills of prayer and to struggle with the ideas and the issues that inform serious engagement with Jewish liturgy. I have argued above that those who are competent and comfortable with prayer—whether they be teachers, students or parents—and who can articulate a rationale for prayer are most likely to remain active members of our community. They will want to transmit their love of Judaism to the next generation.

I do not underestimate the challenge of making *tefillah* alive and vibrant. I have seen enough examples of achievement to believe that we can impart to our pupils the same passion for being Jewish that we feel ourselves. It is a worthy challenge. I believe that we are up to it!

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