Meaningful Tefillah in the Synagogue

*Tefillah* does not come easily to most contemporary Jews. Standing before God, sensing God’s presence, speaking to God, and “hearing” God speak in return: these may be the most difficult acts that our tradition asks Jewish adults of this generation to perform. I know the difficulty involved—and can attest to the reward. The blessing conferred by the effort is beyond measure.

Research establishes, and personal evidence confirms, that yearning for God remains widespread in our “disenchant ed” age. Gratitude to God wells up in many modern hearts. Pleas for life and healing have in recent years become standard in almost every synagogue service. Jews of my acquaintance seem resigned to not understanding how a good God could allow so much evil to take place in the world—a problem at least as old as Job—and in particular how God could permit the Holocaust and so many other horrors of our era. And still we pray, or try to pray. Though our modern minds do not invoke God when explaining natural events or history, and few of us are skilled in the discipline of prayer, the search for God continues. “God-wrestling” is widely practiced and respected. Many hearts still burn with the sparks of faith.

It is thus not surprising that the synagogue remains the signature institution of Conservative (and some other forms of) Judaism, even if most Conservative Jews do not come to shul on a regular basis. Worship—particularly the Shabbat morning service—seems more than ever to be the event by which Conservative synagogues are most often judged. The quality of *tefillah* in our Movement demands urgent, sustained, honest, and impassioned attention.

To a significant extent, I think, the issues that many Conservative Jews have with *tefillah* are a function of the lack of fit between their religious situation and the inherited design of the synagogue service and the sanctuaries in which worship transpires.

We come to shul seeking deeper connection to community, tradition, our innermost selves, and God, and often enough sit in large spaces that work against intimacy, preclude any sense of togetherness, and drown out devotion.

What is more, Conservative Jews do not agree on what they would like to see happen in synagogue. Some want greater participation in prayer by the congregation, even at the expense of quality in music, discourse, or *kavanah* (intention, mindfulness). Older congregants tend to value formality, traditional melodies (sung solo by the hazzan or with choir), and sermons on issues of the day. Others favor short *divrei Torah* or open
discussion of the Torah portion among the congregants. Partisans of musical
instruments are matched by opponents who oppose this on aesthetic or halakhic
grounds. Fewer and fewer Conservative Jews of any age or taste are comfortable in the
Hebrew. The “regulars” resist change, laugh about three-hour services to which many
(most?) congregants arrive at the half-way point, and recognize that the status quo does
not promote communal or individual devotion. Many rabbis, cantors, and ritual
committees feel trapped, while most congregants vote with their feet. The great majority
of Conservative Jews rarely come to services.

I do not minimize any of these difficulties—and will address them in next week’s post—but I fear the problem (and so the solution) goes deeper still. We are talking about tefillah, after all: depths of soul, stirrings of the heart, challenges to the mind, powerful ambivalences, relationship to God.

In shul, in prayer, we find human beings at their most vulnerable and inchoate. Conservative Jews may sit with hands folded, rise obediently when the rabbi requests them to do so, and politely join in responsive readings or communal song. But strong emotion accompanies them to shul. It comes into view when they call out the names of the loved ones for whose health they pray, or choke back tears as they recite the mourner’s kaddish, or crowd the aisle to kiss the Torah as it passes on its way from or to the ark, or beam at the celebration of life-cycle events.

Daven in a Conservative congregation on the High Holy Days, join in the fervent chant of the last avinu malkeinu after 25 hours of fasting and soul-searching, dance round after round of hakafot on Simhat Torah, feel the joy rising up from the pews when b’nai mitzvah or couples about to be married are called to the Torah, participate in singing the affirmation that Torah is a “tree of life” as it is returned to the ark, and you will know that genuine tefillah does take place in Conservative sanctuaries. Gratitude, petition, fear and trembling, joy and reflection on life’s meaning are at times intense. Holiness is sought—and found.

I don’t think Abraham Joshua Heschel was quite fair to the American synagogue when he said that it had become “a graveyard where prayer is buried” and “suffered from a severe cold.” I have been to synagogues where Jews “pray by proxy”—we all have—but I have also been part of prayer communities that, at their best, bring those who participate to heights and depths otherwise unattainable.

It is true that many Jews in Conservative pews today are unlettered in the fine points of Judaism, far from punctilious in their observance, unsophisticated in their personal theologies, and unsure of whether and how God commands action and hears prayer. Yet, they are utterly sincere in their search for holiness and the Holy One. We do not need to romanticize or idealize these Jews (my parents were among them). They are good enough as they are. We just need to serve them better: to provide experiences of tefillah that, through music, words, and artful silence, usher them into encounter with God, their fellow Jews, and themselves.
I am confident that we can do this in Conservative synagogues because we do so now on a regular basis in dozens of shuls. In next week’s post, I will explain how I think we can facilitate a greater measure of devotion in *tefillah* with greater regularity.