Responding to Tefillah Posts

I want to second Barbara White’s comment that this blog has turned into a real conversation in the past few weeks—and that’s good. The outpouring of responses to my pieces on tefillah demonstrates yet again that Conservative Jews care about this subject, want tefillah to be part of their lives, and wish to see their synagogues strengthened. Thanks to all who took the time to share their thoughts.

Many bloggers stated that “tefillah is X” or “Y is not tefillah,” though they, of course, disagreed with one another on what X and Y are. I don’t see how we can state unequivocally what “tefillah must be,” and then rule out all other views. The siddur has served Jews so well for so long because it elicits and addresses a multitude of emotions, thoughts, and intentions. There are times when tefillah seeks or achieves what Rabbi Diane Cohen calls a sense of connection. At other moments, it yearns for or engages in what she calls dialogue with God. At still other times, I find it difficult to differentiate between these two.

It is also not clear to me that particular theological assumptions are needed to engage in tefillah, beyond commitment to the worthiness of the practice. Mordecai Kaplan, who prayed daily, seems to have reasoned that it is crazy to believe God actually hears our prayers when we utter them. No such personal deity exists, in his view. Abraham Heschel did believe that God hears prayer, and did attribute personal attributes to God, even “pathos” or “emotion,” though his view of prayer, revelation, and God was extremely complex. Many Jews I know see no need to decide between Kaplan and Heschel when they pray. They bear out the wisdom of the joke about the Jews who argued all day about whether God exists, but paused the argument when it came time to say Minhah. The diversity of views expressed in the blog posts reminds us, too, of the lesson that there are Jews like Schwartz who come to synagogue to talk to God, and Jews like Goldberg who come to synagogue to talk to Schwartz. Our communities contain both kinds of Jews—and depend on both.

That is not to say that any and all notions of prayer are equally valid in my mind. I agree with several of this week’s respondents that tefillah is not a show. It must be more than entertainment. Tefillah is something we do, not something we watch others do. But here, too, the boundaries sometimes blur. You might listen to a niggun for a few minutes fairly passively, then open and give yourself over to the music. And then, for a moment, you may find yourself inside the music or the spirit that it summons—before the “switch” flips again and you are back to reverie and then vague attentiveness. The same holds true for our response to the words of the siddur as they rush by, or the messages delivered by our rabbis. “Outside” and “inside” are not always clearly distinguishable. Tefillah, like energy, comes at times in waves that build over a sustained period and, at other moments, flashes in discrete bursts that light up our consciousness and are gone as quickly as they came.
That's especially true when, as Jeremy Borovitz wrote, the primary element in prayer is *yearning*. I responded strongly to his comments, seconded by Rabbi Jesse Olitzky and others. This is why I so love singing and swaying to “Yedid Nefesh” at Kabbalat Shabbat services; why, perhaps, so many of the melodies Jews use in *tefillah* express longing for God rather than presume God’s presence and attention. We want to move ourselves in God’s direction, and to move the world in the direction God has set for it. So much is lacking or out of place. We recognize that we, too, are lacking and not where we should be.

Bob Braitman is absolutely right: in order to improve the quality of *tefillah* in our synagogues (and in our lives outside of synagogue), we should ask Jewish men and women what they hope for in prayer. What do they want? What do they need? What in the siddur speaks to them? What leaves them cold? What do they believe God—however they understand God—wants to hear from them? What are they prepared to reply?

We need to transform our synagogues together so that they can help us transform ourselves through *tefillah*, alone and together (see Rabbi Eliezer Diamond’s comments on the matter). I hope this blog conversation helps push us in that direction.