Meaningful Tefillah in the Synagogue, Continued

What shall we do to facilitate high-quality tefillah in Conservative synagogues, by which I mean tefillah that encourages encounter with God and reaches to the deepest layers of the self?

There is no one formula, of course. Jews bring different needs, backgrounds, beliefs, interests, and aesthetic sensibilities to the synagogue. They are lifted up in prayer by more than one kind of service. What “works” for me may leave you uninspired, and vice versa. Some congregations respond to this diversity by offering a variety of minyanim on Shabbat morning, making sure to bring all congregants together periodically so as not to lose the sense of being part of a single community. The following four guidelines for tefillah seem to me essential, regardless of a congregation’s size or the style of its worship:

1. **Make sure the synagogue is a real community.** Have you ever wondered at the fact that the opening words of the Mah Tovu prayer address fellow Jews before turning to address God? Encounter with the Creator is facilitated by our sense of connection to the fellow creatures gathered around us as we pray. Our kavanah is increased as a result of theirs; our burdens are eased, our spirit liberated.

A synagogue’s success as a house of prayer correlates directly with its standing as a house of assembly, a community of shared responsibility, celebration, and meaning.

There are many well-known, surefire ways to build community. Tefillah improves markedly as a result.

2. **Make the synagogue a house of study.** Prayer is rarely achievable without effort, despite the fact that prayer is at times the most natural thing in the world. For one thing, synagogue services use a fixed order of prayers that seek to channel individual kavanah and unite an assembly of disparate pray-ers into a congregation that—as one—rises and chants blessing to God. What is more, prayer does not come easily to modern men and women who do not normally make God a part of the way they account for things that happen in the world. Study of the siddur helps to bridge the gap. The more we know and reflect on the Jewish texts and history from which the siddur arises, the more we know the meanings found in and brought to the prayer by Jews over many centuries; the more we ponder the tefillot and discover personal meanings in the words, the more tefillah can help us stand before God.

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*The Hebrew language* assists mightily in that effort. It helps that my great-grandparents said these same words in the Ukraine and my cousins say them still in Israel and Argentina. I hope my children will say them after I am gone.
Learn Torah. Torah study, *divrei Torah* by rabbis or congregants, and discussions of the weekly portion and haftarah likewise help each of us to remember with gratitude “before whom you stand.”

*Focusing in depth on particular passages* is a particularly effective means to increase kavanah. It puts in boldface, as it were, the passages that mean the most to us so that they rise in greeting and welcome as we make our way through the service on subsequent encounters. One such passage for me is, “It [Torah] is a tree of life to all who take hold of it”; another, describing the angels who model prayer for us mortals, calls them “all beloved, all clear-headed, all masters of their own desires, all doing with awe the will of their Creator.”

*Bring (metaphorically, at least) stereo headphones to shul.* These enable you to hear the words on the page in one ear, and the meaning you have learned to attach to those words, with the help of shared learning, in the other ear. The playlist on your stereo will change over time. A verse you hardly noticed for years jumps out at you one day and gives you pause. New meanings may appear suddenly. You may find yourself singing a melody you cannot recall learning.

*Add new voices to the prayers.* The Rabbinical Assembly’s *Mahzor Lev Shalem* is so effective, I think, because it includes reflections by a range of contemporary authors, men and women of diverse beliefs and sensibilities. Our Sabbath services should do likewise.

**3. Fill the synagogue with good music.** This is urgently important for Conservative shuls. I cannot think of a single congregation that achieves meaningful tefillah in the absence of good music. A hazzan who knows how to reach into the depths of the soul makes all the difference to a congregation, modulating melodies that have stirred Jews for centuries with new tunes that capture who we are in this place in this generation—and infusing both with personal kavanah. Unfortunately, cantors who function as solo performers on the bimah have sometimes turned prayer groups into audiences and led many Jews to prefer services without professional cantors. With or without a hazzan, the point is to have music that speaks to the spirit in a way words never can, and that combines with the words on the page to achieve states of joy and devotion otherwise unattainable.

*Musical instruments* have of late revived Sabbath worship in quite a few Conservative synagogues. Congregations opposed to the use of instruments on halakhic or aesthetic grounds need to work extra hard—by means of a cappella groups, choirs, or commitment to learning melodies during the week so they can be sung with fervor on the Sabbath—to make sure that worshippers are not deprived of good music and the successful davening to which it is essential.

*The sanctuary space must be suited to uniting its worshippers in song*—not too large for intimacy, not cold or off-putting, well-designed acoustically.
4. Leave room for silence. Words and music sometimes cannot reach depths of feeling or insight as well as silence can. We come to shul for respite from the week’s incessant din of sensations and demands. Music, words, and silence, working together, can enable Jews for whom belief in God is difficult or fleeting to put aside their doubts for a moment, and pray.

I’m grateful every time this happens, in whatever kind of service, and frustrated when it does not occur. I am certain that great davening can take place in Conservative congregations, large and small, because I have experienced tefillah that “works” in all these settings on many occasions.

We owe it to ourselves as Conservative Jews to expend whatever effort is required to make all our congregations houses of prayer that arouse Jews, upon leaving them, to say “Ma Tovu” to one another. “This is a really good tent of Jacob, you know, a place where I am happy to dwell, an honest-to-goodness house of God.”