

The Thirteen Principles of Tefillah Education

by Dr. Steven Lorch

Last spring's *Siyum Ha'Amidah*, when our first graders celebrated as they completed learning the Amidah prayer, clearly demonstrated the values and goals of our tefillah (prayer) program. Someone paying close attention to the celebration would have learned pretty much everything there is to know about the Solomon Schechter of Manhattan's approach to cultivating spirituality in children.

1: Jewish Symbols

Because the siyum took place on a Monday morning it began with havdalah, the ceremony that usually marks the end of Shabbat and the start of the work week. The children were comfortable with the objects: a cup of grape juice, a spice box, and a candle. They knew what to do with them, and they joined in reciting the brachot. The children's familiarity with the symbols of tefillah sets them up for success in the tefillah experience.

In the older grades, more experiences with other symbols of the tradition – tefillin, lulav, etrog, and shofar – build upon these early exposures, marking our students as natives of the Jewish religious experience, not immigrants to it.

2: Jewish Leadership

The children assumed key leadership roles in the service. Two served as chazzanim, not only leading the congregation in song and recitation but also giving instructions to stand, sit, and gesture. Three others received aliyot during the Torah reading. Leadership is a powerful influence on children's relationship to tefillah. Not only do they develop into knowledgeable insiders in the prayer community, they also take ownership of it and assume responsibility for the affect it has on others.

These first steps in leading tefillah foreshadow the roles the children will take when they are older. They will read Torah, call others to the reading, and supervise it; they will present divrei Torah and lead meditations and other kavanot (spiritual tune-ups). They will put their own distinctive imprint on the experience and on their own prayer community.

3: Boys and Girls as Equal Participants

One boy and one girl came to the front of the congregation to serve as chazzanim, and both boys and girls received aliyot. This was completely natural and unremarkable to the children. But for the teachers, parents, grandparents, and friends in the congregation, who grew up in a Jewish community in which women's leadership opportunities were severely circumscribed, the new reality was noteworthy. So was the matter-of-factness with which the children embraced it. Before our eyes, the religious contribution of half the Jewish people had been reclaimed.

4: Working Together as a Community

As soon as the two chazzanim began, the other children showed that they actively support their leadership. They waited quietly and patiently for them, they sang and recited the prayers with them, and they sang and recited the chazzanim's parts in an undertone to help them remember their lines. They worked together as a community, and their whole was greater than the sum of their individual parts.

In a few years the leadership responsibilities that the students take on will become considerably more complex and demanding. When the leadership expectations escalate, so does the support.

5: The Body Language of Tefillah

Shortly after the service began, the children raised their right hands and covered their eyes. Later, they stood up, took several steps backward and forward, and bowed. They had internalized the gestures and postures of prayer, which transformed their experience from a verbal and intellectual one to a whole-body engagement. When they came to a contemplative prayer, they turned inward by physically shutting out distractions; when they transitioned to a communicative prayer, their movements reenacted the body language of conversation between unequals.

At 6 or 7, the children already pray in word and movement, and the power of their prayers is heightened by their gestures. As they grow and expand their prayer repertoire they will incorporate new physical responses.

6: Nusach - Getting the Words Right

The children were precise in their pronunciation and phrasing. This was evident beginning with the Shema, where their verbalization followed the Torah cantillation. What produces this degree of exactitude is a reverence for the sacred words of the Torah, psalms, and prayers. For this reason, the teachers pronounce the words with precision, and the children learn from them.

7: Nusach - Getting the Melody Right

The children paid great attention to detail. Synagogue music is highly structured and prescribed, with certain scales and note patterns defining each service, and often varying from one section of a service to the next. For example, there are five distinct sections of the weekday morning service, and each has a distinct melody that also differs from those used on Shabbat and holidays. Each melody strongly affects the mood and emotional meaning.

In later years, as the children master more tefillot, the distinctiveness of their accomplishment in both kinds of nusach – words and melody – will become even more evident.

8: The Geography of Tefillah

The Shema and Amidah are the twin pillars of the prayer service. The Shema is a contemplative affirmation of core theological values. The Amidah looks both outward and inward. They are the centerpieces of the liturgy. Everything else revolves around them. When we introduce other tefillot the students will understand that they are peripheral compared to the Shema and Amidah, which are the only tefillot they learn during the first five years of school.

9: Personalizing the Prayer Experience

The children's siddurim are loose-leaf binders that each illustrates with his or her own understanding of the prayer. It is the culmination of a several-week process of reading, studying, and discussion. Each day the children are reminded on every page of how they understand the ideas and feelings imbedded in that particular text.

Within a year or two, their commentary will incorporate words as well as illustrations. Eventually these personal siddurim will be precious records of their growth and development.

10: Understanding the Meaning of Each Prayer

When the service ended, the children transitioned to their Siyum Ha'Amidah presentation. Each child discussed two brachot from the Amidah, explaining their main ideas, themes, and value concepts. These first graders have learned only some of the Amidah's brachot. Over the next few years they will learn the full text and be asked to compare their understanding as first graders with their understanding as second or third graders.

11: Understanding the Conceptual Framework of the Amidah

The children discussed into which of the three rabbinic categories each brachah falls – whether it is a blessing of praise (shevach), of need or request (bakashah), or of thanks (hodayah). Or, as the children put it, "Atah gadol (You're really great, God)," "B'vakashah (Please, God)," and "Todah (Thanks, God)." The class worked together to decide where each brachah fit.

By thinking carefully about the brachot, the children introduced a new element, categorizing them in accordance with a well-established and widely used conceptual framework.

12: The Tradition of Scholarship

Had the teachers simply wanted to expose the children to the categories by which the rabbis made sense of the Amidah, they could have taught them which brachot are shevach (the first three), bakashah (the middle 13), or hodayah (the last three). Instead, they taught them about the categories and then allowed the children to decide which was which. About 60 percent of the children's choices were the same as the rabbis', but that means that the children got eight or nine of them wrong.

Except, of course, they didn't really get any wrong. The children understood the brachot and the categories. By bringing their best thinking and feeling to this task, they became participants in the tradition of learning.

The understanding that they are engaged in an ongoing conversation across generations and oceans with great Jewish scholars is their first experience of what will continue their Jewish studies. When students identify challenging questions about a Torah passage in third or fourth grade, or seek to justify one or another rabbi's opinion in a g'mara in the middle school, they are building on this foundation.

13: A Relationship with God

The Amidah, like most other tefillot, is full of references to God's attributes and the multifaceted ways God relates to people. When the children discuss each brachah, they are thinking and talk about God. They come to think of themselves as being in a personal relationship with God, and they communicate with God through tefillah. Therefore, for many of the children the act of prayer literally is standing before God, and they feel God's presence and engage God in conversation almost every day.

For our first graders, the central reality of tefillah is this developing relationship with God, who is a palpable presence in their lives.

Dr. Steven Lorch is a rabbi and the head of school at the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan.