

Prayer and Praying: Teaching the Inner Life

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What does it mean to teach the skills and attitudes of the inner dimension of a religious life? What is the relationship between education and spirituality? Obviously, this is a large and complex problem, far beyond the scope of a short essay. What I propose to do, however, is to deal with just one area of the many which such an issue might encompass, namely, what do we mean when we talk about teaching prayer?

By and large most curriculum materials that deal with the area of prayer are in actuality not so much explorations of prayer as they are examinations of the prayerbook and they tend to center on two possible emphases. First, these materials And here I include the work that we have published at the Melton Research Center as part of our Holidays/Mitzvot/Prayer Curriculum might focus on the structure of the prayerbook, teaching what some have called the "geography" of the service. The goal is to help the student learn the differences between the various services of the liturgy, so that he or she will come to feel comfortable in the synagogue. The student should learn, for example, how Minha differs from Arvit, how the Amidah of Shabbat compares to the Amidah of weekdays and how the order of Psalms in P'seukei D'zimra functions as an introduction to the Shaharit prayers. Years ago a teacher of mine put the objective of such learning this way: "when you walk out of here, you should be able to feel at home in any synagogue in the world."

Because of this goal, such curricular programs often add the dimension of practical prayer experience in the classroom: The Melton curriculum, for instance, recommends a daily Minha or Arvit service in class to help the children learn through practice. The United Synagogue Education Department has produced a set of audio tapes, prepared by Dr. Saul Wachs, which are intended to help students learn the nusah of the various services.

Often, coupled with the "geography" of the service is a related focus on the "choreography" of prayer, namely, teaching students the various physical movements that occur during a service which the educated pray-er should recognize-- sitting and standing, steps backwards and forward, bowing, etc.

A second major thrust in educational programs that deal with prayer has been the key dimension of the Melton Center's work-- a focus on the meaning of the prayers. Some years ago we held a planning meeting at the Seminary to discuss the direction for the proposed Prayer curriculum. Professor Seymour Siegel, z"l, was asked to reect on the

question of the goals of a prayer curriculum. Professor Siegel argued that the prayerbook could best be seen as a "repository of basic Jewish ideas and values" and it was from that point of view that we should teach it. In the light of that perspective, an examination of Melton's curriculum would show that we have tried to look at the specific meaning of each prayer and have tried to express that meaning in terms that were age-appropriate to the students for whom the curriculum was intended. Hence in the lesson on Ahavah Rabbah in the curriculum for ten-year olds, we focus on the idea that "each of us, through effort and study, can come to personally 'own' the Torah." This idea is expressed through a set of age-appropriate learning activities.

The Melton materials on prayer have been very successful in classrooms, but, it can be argued, that part of the reason for their success has been a way which is inherent in the underlying approach of the curriculum. By following Professor Siegel's lead we have turned the siddur into yet another text, no different from studying the Bible or Mishnah. And by focusing on the geography and choreography of the service, we have emphasized intellectual skills and behavioral norms. What we haven't done is look at the heart of prayer itself. To put it another way, we have taught prayer, but not praying.

Now, in fairness, we ought to point out an important mitigating factor. As Professor Seymour Fox has put it, we ought to be careful to think critically about what schools are good at doing and what they are not. In other words, we know that schools are places in which ideas can be explored and discussed. We know that a good school can facilitate intellectual growth and curiosity. But no one ever said that a school was designed to teach the spiritual arts, such as prayer. Perhaps such matters are best learned elsewhere. At Melton (and one sees a similar approach in the work of others as well who have tried to teach prayer) we chose to focus on "the siddur as a repository of normative Jewish ideas," as Gail Dorph, a Melton curriculum writer has succinctly put it, because teaching ideas is something that we know how to do.

Despite such cautionary counsel, however, I would suggest that teaching the spiritual dimension of prayer is something we cannot ignore. But before we leap into practical curricular experiments, we ought to think hard about what precisely it is that we want to get across. At this point, in other words, the educational question concerning inner dimension of prayer is not how to teach prayer, but one of "what" and "why". Let me suggest some possible routes of exploration.

The question of prayer was one I tried to examine in one chapter of my book *Finding Our Way: Jewish Texts and the Lives We Lead Today* (new edition: Jewish Publication Society, 2004). There I tried to focus on the experience of prayer and the peculiar nature of the text we call the Siddur. Unlike any other Jewish text, the Siddur demands a relationship from us: for here we are not studying words on the page; we are actually speaking them. In a literal way, the words become our own. Thus any distance between the speaker and the text become especially problematic. When we study a midrash that we don't agree with, we can say "okay, that's not me." But what happens when the words of the liturgy are the words that flow out of my mouth during the most intimate of religious moments, the hour of prayer?

Thus, learning the meaning of the prayers only deals with part of the problem. In fact, knowing what the prayers mean may actually create problems for the one who prays! (An experience perhaps similar to learning what the text of the opera really means after listening to the lovely music for many years.) I try to suggest three aspects of relationship to the prayerbook which strike me in this context as the beginning point of an educational perspective on prayer.

First, I would want to look at the experience of what I call "mental editing." I have described mental editing as the process by which we simply tune out the noise of those phrases that don't touch us or that we disagree with. In that way we create a kind of "countertext" to the liturgy, which is to say, we mentally adjust the literal content of what we are saying to conform to our own beliefs and values. To put it another way, we think the words we mean to be saying as we are saying the words printed on the page. Perhaps it's not even "thinking" these alternative words; it may be more of a kind of "leaning" toward them, like whispers in the back of the mind.

What I am suggesting here is that keeping the traditional language means creating moments of tension between ourselves and the liturgy and there is something in that very process which keeps prayer active and alive. The traditional liturgy throws down a kind of challenge to us; it forces us to assert who we are and what we stand for, even in "opposition" to the liturgy itself.

But mental editing is only part of the story. Prayer is not only a matter of affirming or confronting intellectual beliefs. Most discussions of prayer tend to emphasize the "belief" side of prayer and the denotative content of the words. But prayer has a strong nonrational component as well. One such experience is what I would term "associative reverie." Reverie is not without content; it lies somewhere between a daydream and a thought. I call this "associative reverie" because the moment of reaction is touched off by a personal association that one has with the words one is praying.

This sense of connection to the liturgy is something difficult to communicate to another person because the thread of association is too complex and too subtle to express easily in words. More often than not this personal association is not really like a daydream (which tends to be elaborate or lengthy), but is rather a quick associative thought that ashes through the mind as one moves on to the next word on the page.

Associative reverie is an experience which Heschel described as "the imaginative projection of our consciousness into the meaning of the words." Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (Scribners, 1954), p. 28. Of course, it is hard to put this associative mode of prayer into words and for each person these associations will be different, but without this element, one of the most important dimensions of prayer will be ignored or lost. To my mind the experience of associative reverie is another goal for education of the inner life.

But there is something else as well. Associative prayer is still very much focused on the

words of the liturgy, though doing so in an open-ended fashion. But there is another dimension of prayer which takes the experience one step further-- prayer which seems to be beyond the words themselves. Here we enter a side of prayer which verges on the mystical and yet it is an aspect of prayer that is not as unfamiliar as it may first appear. For many people have had experiences in prayer which have little to do with the words one is saying, times in which one is simply being swept up in the power of the moment. These experiences, I have called this, for lack of a better term, "prayer beyond the words." It is, I believe, what Hasidic texts mean when they talk about discovering "the lights within the letters" of the prayers. For examples see Arthur Green and Barry W. Holtz, *Your Word is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer* (Jewish Lights, 1993).

In such prayer the meaning of the individual words is insignificant; rather it is the "lights"-- in some way an aspect of the mysterious God-- that one seeks to find. Values, associations, meanings all seem very insignificant in such an understanding of prayer. For most of us this kind of prayer seems impossible to attain. But even without seeing "lights within the letters," a similar kind of purely emotional experience in prayer may, in fact, be something that we can encounter in our lives too.

When I said before that people are less unfamiliar with this side of prayer than they might think, I was thinking of one specific example (although there surely are others as well): namely, the kind of connection to music that seems to speak very directly to many people in a prayer service. Think for a moment of the Kol Nidre prayer. Here we have a text that is hardly inspiring in its obvious content. And yet can we recall any moment more powerful, more emotionally compelling, than the intonation of that prayer on the eve of Yom Kippur? The content of the prayer is far less important than the context of the moment and the music of the chant.

Some may have found this connection in the sound of singing during certain parts of the service-- their own singing mixed with their fellow worshippers. Others experience it in the singing voice of the leader of the service; for others it might be found in a choir or in musical instruments. Of course, music is only one example of the experience of being "beyond the words" in prayer.

I have tried to look three aspects of prayer and suggest what such an approach to prayer might mean to the enterprise of Jewish education. Such a reaction is only the first step of curricular work. What would come next is an exploration of the way that such ideas can move from theory to experience. How could students learn about this way of thinking about prayer and how could the educational program move beyond "learning about" to "learning that"? To accomplish this we would have to think about the age of the students and the developmental issues that we the teachers would have to confront, whether they be children or adults. And then we would have to develop a set of educational activities to move from idea to reality. But it seems to me that only through such a crucial exploration can we begin to answer the concerns of Jews today about their religious lives and to help people move from prayer to praying.