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**TEACHING PRAYER IN LIBERAL SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS: AN  
ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGES**

**By**

**Amy Wallk Katz**

**A DISSERTATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **TEACHING PRAYER IN LIBERAL SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGES**

**By**

**Amy Wallk Katz**

**This dissertation investigates the challenges involved in teaching traditional formal prayer in a liberal supplementary school setting. It describes the origins of traditional worship, explaining its development from biblical times to the present. Additionally the dissertation explores the origins of liberal Judaism, and distinguishes between the major movements (the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist) within liberal American Judaism.**

**One of the significant institutions of the liberal American Jewish community is the supplementary school. This dissertation describes the development of these schools, explaining the differences between those schools founded by Jews from Central Europe and those founded by Jews from Eastern Europe. The dissertation also includes a summary and exploration of the waning religious observances of many liberal American Jews in the 1940s and 50s. Finally, I continue by investigating how supplementary school educators sought to compensate for what they thought was not being taught at home.**

**Besides investigating the historical and social contexts of the teaching of prayer in the United States, this dissertation analyzes prepared curricular materials that have been used in supplementary schools during the 1980s and 90s. By examining how experienced, thoughtful educators articulated their aims**

for teaching prayer, I hoped to have yet another lens for understanding the challenges of teaching prayer in a liberal supplementary school setting.

To add yet another layer of understanding to this study, I investigated my own teaching of prayer. As an ordained Conservative rabbi, I had some very clear ideas about how I thought prayer ought to be taught in the supplementary school. In this chapter I look closely at my practice and offer my analysis as one insider's view of how difficult it is to teach prayer.

The results of my investigations indicate that there may be some inherent tensions to the teaching of prayer. For example, educators are unsure of how to direct the supplementary school curriculum. They are struggling to decide whether to focus on Hebrew skills acquisition or whether to teach big ideas of the formal liturgy. In addition they are challenged to find a way to present traditional liturgy to Jews living in the modern world. No doubt, there are other ways to characterize dilemmas faced by Jewish educators. These two are simply illustrative examples that I offer based on my own experiences and analyses.

While this dissertation examines the teaching of prayer in a supplementary school setting, its findings can be applied to many other liberal settings for both children and adults.



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## **DEDICATION**

**When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. ...**

**When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift.**

**For over the Tabernacle a cloud of the Lord rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.  
(Exodus 40:34-38)**

**This dissertation is dedicated to Tamar Yonina, Gabriel Ari, and Nina Ruth. May they always have faith that the Divine Presence is with them on their journeys.**

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Before I began my studies at Michigan State University, I was a student at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The faculty at both of these institutions is exceptional. My professors, Rabbi Benzion Bergman, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Dr. Gail Zaiman Dorph, and Dr. Elieser Slomovic, inspired me. They have continued to support me in my academic pursuits, making time to talk with me about my work whenever I called upon them.

In addition, over the years I have worked closely with Dr. David Ackerman, Dr. Isa Aron, Mr. Alan Edelman, Rabbi Samuel Joseph, Rabbi Lewis Warshauer and Rabbi Elana Zaiman. Their support and friendship have helped me complete this dissertation.

I completed the course work for this dissertation while living in Lansing, Michigan, working at Congregation Kehillat Israel. Before moving to Lansing, I had never lived in such a small Jewish community. It was an adjustment for me both personally and professionally. Fortunately I met wonderful people (too many to name) who supported me on my journey. The KI community is special and I

will always appreciate what I learned working with so many thoughtful people. I especially appreciate the students in the KI school. They taught me a great deal about teaching and learning. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to work with them, their parents and the members of the congregation.

My dissertation reflects my deep love of Judaism and my desire to help future generations understand what Judaism has to offer Jews in the modern world. My parents, Silas and Charlotte Wallk, were my first teachers of Judaism. The foundation they laid was exceptional. I know that many of my accomplishments would not have been possible, were it not for the many opportunities my parents provided me.

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I am painfully aware that the many hours I spent writing this dissertation was time away from my three children: Tamar Yonina, Gabriel Ari, and Nina Ruth. Each of my children has an infectious smile; it is the twinkle in their eye and the joyous way they go about life that sustain me daily.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	xi
CHAPTER 1 <i>B'RESHEET</i> : IN THE BEGINNING.....	1
Hidden Meaning .....	1
Alienated by Tradition.....	3
Relating to Prayer.....	5
Recognizing the Tension .....	6
CHAPTER 2 THE ORIGINS OF JEWISH WORSHIP .....	10
Introduction.....	10
Biblical and Historical Origins of Jewish Worship .....	10
Denominations of Liberal Judaism .....	27
Liberal Jews' Struggle with the Traditional Liturgy.....	51
Conclusion.....	65
CHAPTER 3 SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS: FROM TALMUD TORAH TO BAR MITZVAH PRELUDE .....	68
Jewish Immigration to the United States .....	69
Congregational Schools: Providing a Jewish Milieu Outside the Home .....	83
Waning Jewish Practice in the Home .....	88
Curricular Responses to Waning Home Practices and Declining School Hours .....	95
CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF CURRICULAR MATERIALS.....	102
Families Attending Supplementary Schools: Ambivalent Needs and Desires .....	102
Supplementary School Teachers: Committed but Unprepared .....	105
The Critical Role of Curricular Materials .....	111
Method of Analysis .....	111
The Tension between Teaching Hebrew and Teaching Prayers .....	116
Reconstructionist: Personal Meaning Paramount, Hebrew Minimal .....	117
Conservative: Conceptual Ideas Primary, Hebrew an Adjunct .....	121
Reform: Personal Meaning Stressed, Hebrew Is Integrated Into Each Lesson .....	124
Torah Aura: Hebrew and Personal Meaning: Equal Time .....	126
Behrman House: Hebrew Paramount, Personal Meaning Minimal.....	129
The Curricular Landscape .....	130
What Accounts for the Changing Ideas about Teaching Prayer? .....	132
CHAPTER 5 "WHY WOULD YOU SAY A PRAYER IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE WHAT IT SAYS?": EXAMINING MY TEACHING OF PRAYER.....	140
The Lansing Jewish Community.....	141

How Prayer Was Taught Before I Arrived.....	143
My Vision of What It Means to Study the Liturgy and Learn How to Pray....	146
My Experiences with Prayer and Liturgy .....	150
A Typical Sunday Morning Service at Kehillat Israel .....	153
Method of Analysis .....	164
Teaching Prayer and Praying Simultaneously Leads to Compromised Pedagogy .....	167
60 Students between 2nd and 7th Grades Creates Pedagogical Problems	168
Student-Generated Questions Not Addressed .....	176
A Rabbi, Preacher and Teacher in Israel.....	182
Conclusion.....	194
 CHAPTER 6 <i>NA'ASEH V'NSHMA</i> : WE WILL DO AND WE WILL UNDERSTAND .....	196
Negotiating the Tension Between Teaching Basic Hebrew Skills and Teaching for Understanding .....	198
Prayer and Modern Mindset .....	200
Implications for Practice: In and Out of School.....	203
The School Service as a New Practice.....	205
Teaching Prayer and Praying in Other Liberal Settings.....	208
Looking Forward: A Story .....	210
 BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	214

## **LIST OF TABLES**

<b>TABLE 1 COMPARISON OF CURRICULAR MATERIALS .....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>TABLE 2 MASTERY CHART .....</b>	<b>127</b>



## **CHAPTER 1**

### ***B'RESHEET: IN THE BEGINNING***

When Ma came in, Reverend Alden stood up and said they would all have the refreshment of prayer together before saying good night. They all knelt down by their chairs, and Reverend Alden asked God, Who knew their hearts and their secret thoughts, to look down on them there, and to forgive their sins and help them to do right. A quietness was in the room while he spoke. Laura felt as if she were hot, dry, dusty grass parching in a drought, and the quietness was a cool and gentle rain falling on her. It truly was refreshment. Everything was simple now that she felt so cool and strong. (Wilder, 1939, p. 218-219)

This text makes me envious. At times, I want to be Laura, so able to have an uplifting, rejuvenating prayer experience and so fortunate to have a religious leader who can offer her strength. At other times, I am envious of the Reverend Alden for knowing exactly what to say as a religious leader and how to lead the Ingalls family in a powerful prayer experience. As a rabbi, people often look to me to invoke prayer or make a prayer moment meaningful. I cannot imagine being able to do what Reverend Alden did.

The Wilder passage is an image of what I wish prayer were like for me, my family, my students, and my fellow Jews. In addition to being uplifting, prayer—a form of dialogue with God—should be meaningful and spiritually connecting.

And yet, often it is not.

#### **Hidden Meaning**

The meaning and purposes of traditional Jewish prayers are difficult for many modern Jews to grasp. Commenting on the hidden meaning of prayer, contemporary theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes:

Prayer does not complete itself in an instant nor does it move on a level plane. It thrusts itself forward through the depths and heights,

through detours and by-ways. It advances gradually from word to word, from thought to thought, from feeling to feeling, arriving, we find, on a level where words are treasures, where meanings lie hidden, still to be discovered. (Cantor's column of Congregation Beth Shalom monthly bulletin, February 2002)

Heschel is describing an ideal. He understands that ideas are often hidden, increasing the modern Jew's challenge to find meaning in a particular prayer or to connect to a prayer experience. While prayer has the potential to comfort, invigorate, and uplift, many aspects of routine prayer can be monotonous, boring, or alienating.

All too often, we fail to uncover prayer's hidden meaning. Searching for meaning, we simply cannot find it. Why? Perhaps first and foremost, we confront the stumbling block of the Hebrew language. Making matters worse, many Jews lack the background to grasp the significance or allusions of the extraordinary texts being recited.

Sadly, knowingly, we laugh as we read Myla Goldberg's description of what occurs at a typical service in liberal Jewish congregations in the novel *Bee Season* (Goldberg, 2000):

At the *Amidah's* beginning, Rabbi Mayer tells the entire congregation to rise. The congregants are supposed to remain standing for as long as they wish to pray, sitting down when they have finished. A lot of people actually do begin by praying, but most stop soon after they start. They become distracted by thoughts of the evening's primetime television lineup or by how awful the perfume is of the old lady with dyed hair who always sits in that seat under the air duct so that the smell of her goes everywhere. (p. 50)

## **Alienated by Tradition**

Too often, for too many Jews, formal and communal prayer hinders spirituality. Worse, it can drive Jews away from worship or from Judaism. The Hebrew seems impenetrable, the rules too rigid, the references too obscure. Writing about the American Jew's encounter with traditional prayer, Wieseltier (1998) argues that, to many, prayer seems an "obscure and arduous practice" (p. vii).

Roger Kamenetz (1994) describes the plight of the typical contemporary liberal Jew who had some nominal Jewish education but knows nothing of Jewish ideology and is unfamiliar with Hebrew:

In short, I'd grown up the typical liberal American Jew, loyal to his tribe and family, and very proud of the ethical heritage of the Jewish people. My Jewish identity was like a strong box, very well protected, but what was inside it?

The interior meaning of being a Jew was indistinct, smuggled, inchoate—much like the Hebrew letters I could pronounce but not truly read. (p. 57)

Kamenetz writes about a modern Jew who is alienated by tradition. He has no sense of what Judaism is about but remains an identified Jew despite his ignorance.

Allegra Goodman (1998) offered a somewhat different insight. She described a Jewish man's alienation while sitting in services. The disconnect between a modern Jew and the traditional prayer experience is all too familiar:

Nina was sitting with the children in the women's section, and Andras sat alone in the sanctuary among the hundreds who were fasting, alone, havng eaten breakfast that morning, and drunk his coffee black as usual. He sat, listening to the Rav, and the fast day was foreign to him, the community grieving together in this artificial way. The holiday couldn't move Andras, the day set aside for

sadness, the reading of this poetry, all prescribed, as if grief could be expressed that way, as if mourning could be accomplished with these simple and unthinking acts and, at the end of it, put away. This is why he thinks these recitations and acts of prayer are for children—because they are so flat and simple, because magically they are intended to discharge infinite obligations. (p. 131)

For Andras, prayer was meaningless, uninspiring, and irrelevant. The notion that traditional services are alienating is not unique to Goodman. Wieseltier (1998) also describes how his prayer experiences alienated him from Judaism. "One of the reasons for my failure [in practicing Judaism]," he recalls, "was my experience of prayer. It was a disaster. Thinking and unthinking, in *shuls* and in schools and in forests and in fields, I had been praying for decades, and not once in those decades, not once, did I ever have the confidence that the cosmos in which I prayed was like the cosmos that my prayer described" (p. 19).

While often alienated from the formal liturgy, contemporary Jews often, at the same time, find themselves pulled back to their Judaism. The growing number of memoirs of Jews-reborn being published attests to the fact that many Jews are struggling to reconnect with their Jewish identities. We read of it through the eyes of a journalist who discovers as an adult that his parents were Jewish, even though he was raised a Catholic in upstate New York. We encounter it through the eyes of a spiritually hungry author of self-help books who leaves her professional life to enroll in divinity school (Orsbom, 1998). We re-live it through Leon Wieseltier who recounts hundreds of ways that he was reminded of the power, beauty, and wonder of formal communal prayer in his year of reciting *Kaddish*. Wieseltier describes how the "chubby, bratty" boys from the Jersey Yeshiva shuffle into evening prayers:

Then it comes time for them to say amen; and they sing it out again and again; and with every little chorus I melt. (p. 28)

A chilly Sunday morning. The hum of praying around me was like a low flame, warming me." (p. 261)

We can observe the search for meaning even in movies, such as the recent *Keeping the Faith*, in which Ben Stiller tries to inspire his congregation with song, jokes, and Baptist choirs.

Perhaps most encouraging, all over the United States, American Jewish adults are involving themselves in Jewish education. The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, the flagship of Jewish adult education programs in the United States, was founded in 1986. Since its inception, more than 10,000 individuals have completed or are in the midst of completing a two-year course in Jewish learning. These individuals are seeking to understand Judaism and how it relates to their lives.

### **Relating to Prayer**

To understand these seekers, we must try to understand how these modern, non-traditional Jews relate, or do not relate, to worship. Prayers and praying are at the root of Judaism and still pervade traditional Judaism today. The tradition ordains prayer three times each day. Prayer also surrounds Jewish life-cycle events. Even daily activities—such as eating, rising in the morning, going to sleep, or going to the bathroom—are occasions for Jewish prayer. If modern, non-traditional Jews in ever-increasing numbers become alienated from these core Jewish practices, we face the very real possibility of losing important connections to our Jewish past, present and future.

According to Jewish tradition, formal prayer is essential because it reinforces Jewish values and priorities. It also teaches that:

it is never enough to pray for ourselves alone. Speaking as 'we,' the individual discovers, acknowledges, articulates the needs, desires, hopes, which he, though one man, shares with all men because he is not only a private self but a member of humanity. Besides when we are conscious of those with whom we stand, what we may have wanted to pray by ourselves is generally made less selfish, more humble, and therefore more appropriate for utterance before God. (Borowitz, 1977, pp. 59-65)

Despite its centrality and importance, many modern liberal Jews do not feel bound to pray regularly. Yet, when they do pray, many also want to garner meaning and understand the prayers. They want to be inspired. They want to reach a spiritual peak. A problem erupts when—like instant gratification in other aspects of life—some modern Jews often expect instant nourishment from prayer. And yet, as Heschel explained, the meaning is hidden and has to be uncovered over time.

### **Recognizing the Tension**

I am a Jew and a rabbi. I pray. I teach prayers. I want to help people become pray-ers. Because—even as I envy Laura Wilder's ready access to the sublime—I have experienced the rejuvenating potential of prayer. Ironically – and frustrating to me in my role as spiritual leader – while prayer is central to Jewish life, little is understood about how to teach prayer or inspire praying.

Teaching prayer or praying is difficult. Jewish educators are now responsible for teaching concepts and rituals that historically were learned at home and that derived meaning as a course of regular practice. From a purely practical perspective, teaching the skill and the meaning of prayer takes a lot of time—and

time is scarce in an already packed curriculum. In addition, Jewish educators are challenged to interpret traditional ideas into a modern context.

Prayer should be a portal to religion. A point of connection, not disconnection. Of attraction, not alienation. To derive true meaning from prayer, one must be able to appreciate the experience; to appreciate the experience, one must be able to understand the concepts; and to understand the concepts, one must know the meaning of the words—words written in a language foreign to most American Jews. Educators are caught in a difficult cycle. Do we teach the ideas first and hope that will inspire students to acquire the Hebrew skills? Or do we teach Hebrew so that eventually students are capable of participating in public worship? It is not clear what should come first—understanding or basic skills. Does reason lead to faith? Does faith require the suspension of reason? These unanswered questions are at the heart of what most spiritual leaders or Jewish educators struggle to understand. The questions are not unique or limited to Judaism. They are about how modernity and religion intersect and interact with one another.

In this dissertation, I look to my colleagues, to bookshelves and libraries for insights into how to help others commit to prayer, engage in praying, and discover the power of prayer to provide inspiration, solace, love, and history. This study is my attempt, drawing on our history, the writing of rabbis and teachers, and contemporary experience in creating and teaching curricula, to understand prayer and praying.

One definition of "essay" is an attempt, endeavor, voyage into, or an effort to explore. What follows is a series of essays that explores the difficulties and complexities, undercurrents and challenges of teaching prayer to modern U.S. Jews. No one essay represents the definitive answer to the questions I pose here. Instead, each is an inquiry into the factors and forces that might help explain the contemporary struggles that Jewish educators face as they attempt to teach prayer and praying.

I begin the dissertation by retracing the development of Jewish worship. With the Emancipation, Jewish life changed in profound ways. I describe these changes and articulate various ways Jews have responded to modernity in the United States.

In the next chapter, I examine Jewish life in the United States during the last 100 years, describing the birth of the supplementary school and the lifestyle of liberal Jewish families at this time. This historical lens gives us a context for understanding how prayer has been taught.

While the historical circumstances are enlightening, I address the teaching of prayer by examining some significant curricular materials that are currently used or have been used within the past 15 years. This curricular investigation allows me to understand how other educators conceptualized the teaching of prayer and sheds light on some of the challenges educators face as they teach prayer.

While the prepared curricula reveal a great deal about the teaching of prayer, I thought it important to gather other kinds of data. Since I have taught prayer for more than 20 years to both adults and children, I wanted to see how my practice



could inform my understanding of the challenges of teaching prayer in a supplementary school. By examining the teaching of prayer from several different angles, I hope to shed light on this critical challenge, one central to the continuity of Jewish identity. In many important ways, the chapters that follow are a journey I embarked on to understand the teaching of prayer and praying. I offer them as descriptions of what I have discovered so far. The journey continues.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE ORIGINS OF JEWISH WORSHIP**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand the teaching of traditional Jewish liturgy in liberal supplementary school settings. This chapter supplies background information for the reader who is unfamiliar with Jewish prayer or liberal Judaism. It explains the origins of Jewish prayer, clarifying how a fixed formal liturgy became central to Jewish worship. Next, I describe the three branches of liberal Judaism and reflect on how each movement has struggled with traditional liturgy. Finally, I explain why contemporary liberal Jews are challenged by the traditional liturgy.

#### **Biblical and Historical Origins of Jewish Worship**

A preliminary examination of the Hebrew Bible—where contrasting forms of worship to God are introduced—greatly enhances understanding of the structure and content of traditional Jewish prayer. Despite the changes and developments that have taken place in Jewish prayer over the centuries, it is still the Bible that contains the basic patterns and ideas of all Jewish worship. There are three kinds of worship found in the Bible: spontaneous prayer, psalms, and animal sacrifice.

#### **Spontaneous Prayer**

Moshe Greenberg (1983) points out that the Bible records many spontaneous prayers that appear as part of the narrative of Bible stories. For example, the Bible records several of Moses' personal spontaneous prayers. On one occasion,

Moses prayed for 40 days and nights, interceding on behalf of his people (Deuteronomy 9:18). On another occasion, he prayed on behalf of his sister (Numbers 12:13). David confesses wrongdoing and asks God for forgiveness (II Samuel 24:10). Eliezer expresses thanks to God for enabling him to know who would be a good spouse to bring back to Canaan for Isaac (Genesis 24:27). Hannah turns to God in prayer as she begs God for a child (I Samuel 1:11-13). In total, Greenberg cites 97 examples of personal spontaneous prayers.

What characterizes these prayers is that they are direct expressions of an individual who comes before God in conversation. There is no intermediary. No priest, Levite, or prophet is necessary. The individual does not have to go to some special place in order to speak to God. God can be spoken to or appealed to without special formulas, without fixed prayers, at any time that the person wishes to do so. Such spontaneous individual expressions are not only something we read about in the Bible. From the scholars of the rabbinic period to the charismatic leaders of the Hasidim<sup>1</sup>, spontaneous expressions of gratitude, concern, or anguish have been an important part of Jewish prayer (Dorff, 1992).

Few of us have not engaged in spontaneous prayer at one time or another. When something good happens, or when something we had dreaded does not happen, it is natural for an individual to say “Thank God!”,— often without even realizing that a prayer has been uttered. Dorff (1992) explains:

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<sup>1</sup> Hasidism is a 18th-century east European religious-mystical-revival movement that spread to nearly all parts of the world; today, best exemplified by the Lubavich movement. A Hasid (Hebrew for “pious one”) stresses religious fervor and devotion to good deeds, strict adherence to all laws, customs, and traditions, shunning certain modern influences like television or popular culture. Although study is encouraged, followers of the Hasidic movement are urged to approach Judaism through the heart far more than through the mind.

Most people periodically find themselves wanting to pray and actually engaging in prayer. This especially happens at critical moments in their lives, when they yearn to express exuberant joy, deep sorrow, or overwhelming need. Their prayer may not be liturgically appropriate, and it probably does not come out of a thoroughly developed theology, but the instinct to pray is universal and natural for all. (p. 149)

### **The Book of Psalms**

The Book of Psalms represents a more formal kind of prayer (Sarna, 1993).

According to Jewish tradition, King David authored the Book of Psalms.

However, scholars suggest that the diversity of subjects treated indicate not only multiple authors but also the lengthy period of the book's composition. While King David was the most prominent contributor, other authors were most likely professional poets and musicians. In addition to multiple authorship, it is likely that the Psalms were written for many different purposes. Many psalms were written to be chanted in public worship (Hammer, 1994). There are, for example, psalms that celebrate a military triumph:

Open the gates of victory for me  
that I may enter them and praise the Lord.  
This is the gateway to the Lord—  
the victorious shall enter through it. (Ps. 118:19-20)

And there are psalms that were sung when people were about to enter the

Temple:

Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?  
Who may stand in His holy place?  
He who has clean hands and a pure heart  
O gates, lift up your heads!  
Up high, you everlasting doors,  
So the King of glory may come in! (Ps. 24:3-4, 7)

Some psalms were sung to musical accompaniment as part of the service in the Temple:

It is good to praise the Lord,  
to sing hymns to Your name, O most High,  
To proclaim Your steadfast love at daybreak,  
Your faithfulness each night  
With a ten-stringed harp, with voice and lyre together. (Ps. 92:2-4)

Others were written for a special communal event or holiday such as the Sabbath or the new moon:

The Lord is King,  
He is robed in grandeur; (Ps. 93:1)

The Lord is King!  
Let the earth exult,  
the many islands rejoice (Ps. 97:1)

Other psalms, written in the singular, are more personal in nature. They speak about the events in an individual's life, not of a nation:

God, You are my God;  
I search for You,  
my soul thirsts for You,  
my body yearns for You  
as a parched and thirsty land that has no water. (Ps. 63:2)

I extol You, O Lord,  
for You have lifted me up,  
and not let my enemies rejoice over me.  
O Lord, my God,  
I cried out to You,  
and You healed me. (Ps. 30:2-4)

In distress I called on the Lord. (Ps. 118:5)

The Book of Psalms includes a range of prayers that were appropriate for different ceremonies, moods, and circumstances. It is the attempt of humans to communicate their feelings to God. Nahum Sama (1993) aptly describes the Book of Psalms as follows:

In the Psalms, the human soul extends itself beyond its confining, sheltering, impermanent house of clay. It strives for contact with the Ultimate Source of all life. It gropes for an experience of the divine Presence. The biblical psalms are essentially a record of the human quest for God. Hence, the variety of forms in which the ancient psalmists expressed themselves, reflective of the diverse and changing moods that possessed them as they do all human beings. In short, the psalms constitute a revealing portrayal of the human condition. No wonder they infuse and inform the basic patterns of ... Jewish worship, give character and essence to [its] liturgy, and govern the life of prayer and spiritual activity of the individual and the congregation. (p. 3)

Sarna explains that the 150 Psalms are a collection of prayer that reflect the human beings' experiences. Some are joyful; others articulate distress or loneliness. Some express the concern of the individual, while others focus on the community's needs.

### **Animal Sacrifices**

In addition to spontaneous prayer and psalms, animal sacrifice was a primary form of worship during the biblical period (Hammer, 1994). The book of Leviticus describes the circumstances that call for an animal sacrifice, providing details about how the Israelites are to go about making offerings to God. Sacrifices became a method of expressing human emotions—guilt, repentance, or thanksgiving. By offering sacrifices, the Israelites were able to draw nearer to God.<sup>2</sup>

The biblical understanding of sacrifices differs from those of pagan cultures of the time. The Israeli biblical scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann (1960) argues that, in the pagan religions of Canaan and the other neighboring nations, the gods were

---

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word for sacrifices is *korbanot* – whose root *koof*, *resh*, *bet* (k-r-b) means to draw near.

limited. Powerful, but not omnipotent. The pagan gods not only needed food and drink but, like humans, were controlled by the mysterious realm of fate. Because the ancient mind conceived of its gods as limited in power and subject to fate and magic, human beings could actually persuade the gods to change their minds. Thus, sacrifices in these cultures were more an attempt to influence or control the gods. Worship was accompanied by gifts meant to please the gods.

In contrast, the God of Israel has no physical needs and cannot be controlled by sacrifices; hence, the sacrificial system developed in ancient Israel served a different purpose (Kaufmann, 1960). For the Israelites, sacrifices became symbols of Israel's desire to show deference to God and express feelings of thanksgiving and reconciliation.

How animal sacrifices were conducted changed over time (Hammer, 1994). Initially, following the conquest of the land by Joshua, there were many sites where Israelites were able to offer sacrifices to God. People went on pilgrimages to places like Beth-El, Gilgal, and Beersheba. In addition, there were regional shrines in which sacrifices took place. No sacrifices to God were to be offered outside of the Land of Israel. Over time, the sacrificial system became even more limited. Not only was it forbidden to build an altar outside of the Land of Israel, it was equally forbidden to build one anywhere in Israel apart from the shrine in Jerusalem:

Look only to the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there. There you are to go, and there you are to bring your burnt offerings and other sacrifices. (Deuteronomy 12:5-6)

As a result, sacrifices, which were the main form of communal worship, could no longer take place anywhere outside of Jerusalem. Males were required to travel to Jerusalem to appear before God on the three pilgrimage festivals:

*Pesach* (Passover)<sup>3</sup>, *Shavuot*<sup>4</sup>, and *Sukkot*<sup>5</sup>.

Three times a year—on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the Feast of Weeks and on the Feast of Booths—all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place that He will choose.  
(Deuteronomy 16:16)

Once animal sacrifice was restricted to the Temple and male Israelites were required to travel to Jerusalem three times a year, the religious life of the Israelites changed (Hammer, 1994). On the one hand, it was probably a glorious time in Jerusalem: Thousands of Jewish people from all over the world gathered to worship God. On the other hand, those unable to travel to Jerusalem were unable to personally participate in organized Jewish worship.

### **The Aftermath of the First Destruction: Emergence of the Synagogue**

The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed twice: once by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and again by the Romans in 70 CE.<sup>6</sup> Scholars generally agree that in the aftermath of these crises, Jewish life was transformed as the synagogue and

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<sup>3</sup> *Pesach* (Passover), the Feast of Unleavened Bread, is the first of the three pilgrim festivals described in the Hebrew Bible. Known as the festival of freedom, Passover commemorates the exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.

<sup>4</sup> *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks, is one of the pilgrim festivals described in the Bible. It falls exactly seven weeks after Passover, hence its name. The festival is celebrated as the time of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, and simultaneously as a holiday of the first fruits, which in Temple days were brought to the Temple.

<sup>5</sup> *Sukkot*, the Feast of Booths, is one of the pilgrim festivals described in the Hebrew Bible. It celebrates the completion of the harvest. It also reminds Jews of the wanderings of their ancestors in the wilderness before entering the land of Israel.

<sup>6</sup> Jews do not accept the term AD when recording history as it stands for the Latin Anno Domini, meaning the year of our Lord. Since Jews do not accept Jesus Christ as their God, they use CE,



more formal liturgy replaced the Temple and the sacrificial rite (Bright, 1981; Barnavi, 1992; Hammer, 1994; Hoffman, 1979; Purvis, 1995; Schiffman, 1991).

Scholars concur that the development of the synagogue followed the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE (Hammer, 1994; Levine, 1981; Millgram 1971). During this period, Jewish exiles in Babylonia formed an organized, an almost autonomous community, structured according to places of origin, clan, and social status. Biblical and post-biblical literature contain no specific details about the origins of the house of prayer, later known as the synagogue. Millgram (1971) suggests the following scenario:

The religious void which was created by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple called for a new type of religious experience. But no new form of worship could be deliberately devised; This would have implied the abolition of the divinely ordained sacrificial ritual of the Temple. What did develop was merely the custom of gathering informally on Sabbaths and festivals, a custom that is common wherever there are immigrants from a common homeland. The Jews would gather periodically for mutual support in their foreign surroundings. At these gatherings they would encourage each other in their faith and in their hope of a speedy restoration. These makeshift, informal gatherings in small domestic settings—never planned as worship meetings—ultimately developed into a permanent religious institution. (p. 64)

Levine (1981) describes a similar phenomenon:

The need of the exiles for a substitute for the Temple, the newly instituted fast days for mourning its destruction (Zechariah 7:5), and perhaps the inauguration of public scriptural readings, dated by tradition to this period, were all factors leading to regular meetings which eventually became the basis of what we know as the synagogue. (p. 3)

Hammer (1994) also suggests that it is plausible that the synagogue originated during the Babylonian exile following the destruction of the First

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meaning the Common Era, or BCE meaning Before the Common Era instead of BC, before

Temple. He argues that the synagogue was not intended to be a place for worship, using as evidence a Greek inscription on the floor of a first-century CE synagogue in Jerusalem. The inscription, attributed to Theodotus, says that the synagogue was built as a place for "reading the Law and studying the commandments,"<sup>7</sup> and as a hostel with chambers and water installations to provide for the needs of itinerants from abroad" (p. 61).

By the middle of the first century, the synagogue represented the central Jewish institution in any given community (Levine, 1981). The most frequently mentioned activities include prayer, study, sacred meals, repository for communal funds, courts, general assembly hall, hostel and residence for synagogue officials. Levine claims that, while the synagogue was a very busy place, "first and foremost the synagogue, in its formative stages at least, served as a place for the reading of the Torah and its study" (p. 4). Levine describes the variety of study-related activities that probably took place in the synagogue at this time:

Study—This activity might take one of a number of forms: schools for children, reading and expounding Scriptures at prayer services, regular study sessions for adults generally, or for local sages (in the absence of an academy). (p. 3)

Prayer continued to develop (although not systematically) during the period from the return from exile until the destruction of the Second Temple. The Book of *Ben Sira* (the Christian Bible calls this book Ecclesiasticus) records many prayers that are similar in theme and vocabulary to contemporary prayers.

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Christ.

<sup>7</sup> There are 613 commandments found in the Hebrew Bible—365 "do not's" and 248 "dos." In addition there are many post-Biblical commandments.

Similarly, the Christian Bible, which reflects Jewish life in the first century CE, also demonstrates that prayer was a normal activity (Matthew 6:5-13, 26:36, 26:41-42; Mark 14:32-39; Luke 5:33, 11:1-4). Finally, rabbinic literature<sup>8</sup> of the time suggests that prayer was definitely a part of Jewish life (*Tosefta Rosh HaShanah* 2:17; *Berachot* 5:1).

The evidence strongly indicates that whatever prayer took place in the synagogue prior to the destruction of the Second Temple was either connected to study or secondary to it. Levine (1981) describes prayer in the first century synagogue as follows:

Prayer—Whether regular communal prayer services were held in the synagogue before the destruction of the Second Temple is a matter of conjecture. On the basis of scattered information culled from the New Testament, the Theodotus inscription and several early rabbinic traditions, it would seem that communal daily prayers were institutionalized only after the destruction. In any case, already at an early period regular Sabbath and holiday services were held and attracted large numbers of worshippers. (p.3)

The synagogue was not a rival to either the First or Second Temple. Both the synagogue and Temples served the purpose of worship to God, but did so in very different ways. While the Temple offered service through the sacrificial rite, the synagogue offered service through study. The full development of prayer and its connection to the synagogue did not evolve until the era following the destruction of the Second Temple.

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<sup>8</sup> Rabbinic literature is a very general term that generally refers to the Talmud (which includes both *Mishnah* and *Gemara*), *Midrash* and the *Tosefta*. The *Mishnah* is the first systematic codification of Jewish law, written in 200 CE by Rabbi Judah. During the centuries that followed generations of rabbis studied the *Mishnah*. Eventually their commentaries and discussions were recorded in the Talmud. The Palestinian Talmud was edited in around 400 CE, while the Babylonian Talmud was compiled about a century later. Both versions of the Talmud contain

## **The Aftermath of the Second Destruction: Emergence of the Formal Liturgy**

Within 50 years of the Babylonian exile, the Jewish people had enough resources to be able to send 50,000 people back to their homeland (Barnavi, 1992; Purvis, 1994). Most of them came from the poorer strata of Babylonian Jewry. When they began returning to Jerusalem as early as 538 BCE, Jerusalem was in ruins. For the first few years after the return began, the land had suffered a drought. The city walls were in ruins, many of the repatriates had accumulated heavy debts, and there was dissension among the leaders as to whether the Jews ought to try to re-establish the Davidic dynasty or settle for the religious autonomy granted by the Persian rulers. For all these reasons, the construction of the Second Temple by the exiles who returned from Babylonia did not begin until 516 BCE:

And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites and the sons of Asaph with cymbals to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David King of Israel. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord, because he is good, for his mercy endureth forever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice. (Ezra 3:10-13)

If the synagogue emerged from the crisis of the destruction of the First Temple and the exile of the Jews to Babylonia, the destruction of the Second Temple may be seen as the catalyst that brought about the creation of a fixed liturgy and the entire system of Jewish worship that has informed modern

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laws, legends, ethics, philosophy, medicine, agriculture, astronomy, and hygiene—making it a

Judaism (Cohen, 1995; Hammer, 1994; Schiffman, 1994). The sacrificial order of the Temple had been the focal point of Judaism and the Jewish people from the time of their return from exile until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. With no legitimate king of the lineage of David, it was the Temple that served as a symbol of Jewish unity and of the Jewish people's devotion to God. Scholars generally agree that the Roman destruction of the Second Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial cult was an enormous blow to the Jewish people. The crisis created a spiritual and ritual void, demanding that the Jewish people reorganize. In that reorganization, the community's leaders needed to find ways of defining Jewish identity.

By the time of the destruction, the synagogue had become a well-established institution (Hammer, 1994). Although the Temple was central and its ritual was the divinely sanctioned means of obtaining forgiveness for sins, the synagogue was also important, allowing every worshipper to pray personally to God and to hear the Torah<sup>9</sup> read and explained. The sacrificial ritual of the Temple was accompanied by a liturgy that was originally secondary to the sacrifices but assumed greater importance in the synagogue after the destruction of the Second Temple. Ultimately, almost all the liturgy recited in the Temple was incorporated into the synagogue liturgy (Millgram, 1971; Schiffman, 1994).

Critical to Jewish continuity, in addition to the synagogue, were great religious leaders who dedicated themselves to saving the Jews from destruction. The

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perpetual source of study for generations of Jews.

<sup>9</sup> The Torah refers to the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The Hebrew word Torah literally means "teaching" or "guidance". The Torah contains not only laws, but also history, legend, folklore, and moral and ethical teachings.

Talmud, for example, records the story of Rabbi Yohanah ben Zakkai who escaped from Jerusalem at some point before the Second Temple was destroyed and pleaded with the Roman general Vespasian for the right to establish a school in the small town of Yavneh. Vespasian agreed to this plea. As a result, when Jerusalem was captured by the Romans in 70 CE, ben Zakkai and his disciples were in a better position to help the distraught community adjust to the Temple's destruction. One of ben Zakkai's most significant acts was to argue that the utterance of prayer, the study of Torah, and the performance of good deeds were as acceptable to God as the sacrifices of the Temple:

It is thus that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, his disciples, and their successors, the sages of the Talmud, succeeded in transferring much of the authority, prestige, and function of the Temple ritual to the synagogue service. (Millgram, 1971 p. 82)

Post-exilic Judaism had redefined the synagogue, prayer unconnected to sacrifice, communal study, and a non-priestly group of leaders and teachers (who eventually became known as the Sages), all of which had coexisted with the Second Temple (Cohen, 1995; Hammer, 1994; Schiffman. 1994). These now stepped in to fill the void left by the absence of the cultic center, not by denigrating the Temple's importance, but by symbolically incorporating the Temple and its service into the newly enhanced synagogue and its pattern of prayer and study.

The new structure and content of Jewish worship symbolically incorporated the Temple service. The Sages taught that, since the Temple no longer existed, the reading of the biblical portions describing the sacrifices could substitute for the actual sacrifices. To this day, the traditional liturgy includes references to

sacrifices. For example, on holidays, the biblical portion describing the sacrifice for that day is read as part of the Torah service and is also incorporated into the basic prayer, the *Amidah*.<sup>10</sup> In addition, prayers asking God to restore the Temple were also composed, and the daily psalm that had been recited in the Temple became part of the daily prayer service. Finally, based upon the biblical description of sacrifices, the rabbinic tradition ordains prayer three times each day, with four services on the Sabbath (observed from Friday sunset through Saturday sunset) and Festivals (including Passover, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*) and five on *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement).

The Sages also stressed the connection between sacrifice and worship. They argued that without a Temple for sacrifices, prayer was the substitute commanded by God in the Torah. Prayer was not merely a substitute for sacrifice, it was a reminder of a glorious past, offering a grieving nation hope for the future. By making prayer a central element of Jewish life after the Temple was destroyed, the Sages enabled the Jewish community to continue a life of communal worship to God (Cohen, 1995; Hammer, 1994; Schiffman, 1994).

The pattern of worship that developed after the destruction of the Second Temple was to recite the *Shema*<sup>11</sup> in the morning and evening. In addition, the *Amidah* was recited by itself three times a day—morning, afternoon and evening. Sometime in the third century, it became customary to combine the two into one

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<sup>10</sup> *Amidah* is the Hebrew word for "standing." This is the central prayer of every service. The name reflects the fact that this prayer is recited while standing. It is sometimes called *ha-t'fila* (the prayer) because of its central importance.

unit. When this happened, the basic structure of today's prayer book (in Hebrew, *Siddur*<sup>12</sup>) was set. The *Shema* and the *Amidah* are recited together in the morning and evening, and the *Amidah* is recited by itself in the afternoon service. Jewish liturgy, which has continued to develop for more than two thousand years, is found in the *siddur*.

Through the prayer book, a Jew is introduced to Judaism's struggle to understand God, humanity, and the world. In addition, the prayer book immerses the Jew in the thought and value system of Jewish tradition. Franz Rosenzweig explains:

The sum and substance of the whole of historical Judaism, its handbook and memorial tablet, will ever be the Prayer Book ... He to whom these volumes are not a sealed book has more than grasped the "essence of Judaism." He is informed with it as with life itself; he has within him a "Jewish world." (cited in Glatzer, 1953, p. 251)

For Rosenzweig, the prayer book consists of words and formulae, most of which were composed centuries ago. Formal in nature, these prayers serve as a guide to Judaism, articulating the Jewish concept of God and the universe.

Hammer (1994) explained:

The words specifically reflect Jewish belief, Jewish ideals, Jewish history, and Jewish hopes for the future. They are based upon uniquely Jewish concepts of God, the nature of God and our relationship to Him. To pray in the words of traditional Jewish prayer is to be steeped in the thought and value system of Judaism. (p. 11)

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<sup>11</sup> The *Shema* consists of three paragraphs (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Deuteronomy 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41) from the Torah that are recited in the morning and evening services every day. The *Shema* expresses Judaism's central belief in one God.

<sup>12</sup> The word *Siddur* comes from the Hebrew *seder* (order). It is the Hebrew name for the prayer book.



While political upheaval and destruction of the Second Temple precipitated dramatic changes in the way ancient Jews worshipped, equally severe crises have emerged in more recent times to challenge Jewish religious survival. Such crises have caused the liturgy to further evolve, but in significantly different contexts.

### **Another Kind of Crisis**

After the French Revolution, emancipation became the central issue for Jews throughout Europe. Whenever and wherever Jews were given the opportunity to associate freely with non-Jews and to become a part of the majority, many willingly embraced their new economic, social, and political opportunities. With each step toward full emancipation, many Jews became more assimilated into the host culture. By the end of the 18th century, both in Europe and the United States, constant exposure to non-Jewish culture brought about a gradual decline of certain religious practices, including the neglect of both religious and cultural Judaism.

Addressing how the Emancipation transformed the Jewish community, Hertzberg (1952) examines how life in a free democratic country affected the Jewish community. He recognizes that Jews from Eastern Europe were able to make choices as free citizens in a democracy, choices they were never able to make as subjects to a hateful czar. But the transition from oppression to freedom had its costs:

With this shift from a forced to a freely chosen Jewish identity, there came, however, not only defections, but also a change in the inner nature of the Jewish allegiance. Jewish religious traditions as practiced in the ghetto, had always been in large measure

authoritarian. God had revealed both the written and the oral law and it was one's duty to obey. In the atmosphere of democracy, sanction shifted from duty to sentiment. Sentiment obviously differs in degree among individuals. It is much more responsive to considerations of convenience. (p. 362-363)

Hertzberg is arguing that with exposure to the freedom of a democracy, Jews became more lax in their religious practices. Thus, the legal Emancipation of the Jews in Europe led to a profound transformation of Jewish society. Jews became fluent in the language of the country in which they were living, they entered new careers and professions, became involved in political life, and enthusiastically welcomed the values of their host civilization, its culture and education. In many instances, if there were a conflict between Judaism and the values of the host civilization, the latter prevailed. Thus, Jews in the modern period embraced the economic, social, and political opportunities that were made available to them, often at the expense of their Judaism. The Emancipation offered Jews an opportunity to leave the ghetto and become equal citizens. The opportunity was unprecedented in European history.

In earlier times, the cohesiveness of the Jewish community enabled it to respond to external demands for accommodation. This cohesiveness was largely shattered by the Emancipation, as Blau (1964) asserts:

As a by-product of emancipation, the *raison d'être* of the Jewish community disappeared. Full citizens of modern Western states needed no structure to stand between them and their governments. Thus emancipation weakened Jewish group life. It destroyed almost completely the viability of the Jewish community. (p. 26)

After the Emancipation in the 19th century, the organized Jewish community in Western Europe dissolved, as the need for it diminished. As citizens of Western European states, Jews no longer needed to rely on the Jewish

community to relate to the non-Jewish community world in which they lived.

Instead of one unified response to social and political change, there were many.

Blau (1964) argues that the Emancipation created new problems for the individual Jew:

One to which attention should be called is that of the "hyphenated Jew" —the German-Jew, the French-Jew, the English-Jew, the American-Jew. In the earlier periods, when the Jews lived perforce in a community apart, it was unlikely that any conflict would arise between their loyalties. The Jew who lived in France or Germany knew himself to be a Jew permitted to live in France or in Germany. No circumstance could put him in the intolerable position of trying to decide whether his first loyalty was to France or Germany, or whether it was to Judaism. As far as France or Germany was concerned, he knew himself to be a barely tolerated outsider. The hyphenated Jew is forever confronted with precisely this sort of decision. There is scarcely a major issue with respect to which he does not need to decide whether his primary loyalty lies with the Jewish roots of his being or with the country into which he has been, as it were, adopted. (pp. 22-23)

The Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements are all responses to the social changes which Jewish emancipation brought with in its wake. Each movement offers the individuals a different way of understanding their responsibilities and obligations as a Jew. While there are significant differences between the movements (which will be explained in the next section), for the purposes of this work, I regularly use the term liberal Judaism to include Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism. The next section briefly describes the history of each movement and the liturgical innovations introduced.

### **Denominations of Liberal Judaism**

There are major philosophical differences among the three liberal movements. Still, liberal Jews share certain challenges in finding meaning in

traditional prayers (Ariel 1998; Dorff 1992; Gillman, 1990; Gordis, 1995; Kamenetz 1994, 1997; Hoffman 1997; Holtz, 1993; Wieseltier, 1998; Wolpe, 1990, 1992, 1993). Before discussing these difficulties, the philosophy of the three movements and their liturgical history will be considered.

## **Reform Movement**

Reform Judaism was a response to the Emancipation in Germany:

Reform Judaism was solidly rooted in the optimistic faith of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, and its German expression (the *Aufklärung*), emphasized a firm belief in human progress and the ability of reason to promote such progress. Reason could bring men and women together by demonstrating that behind the different religious expressions there was a common faith—the religion of humanity. This religion distrusted irrational doctrines and repressive institutions, superstitions, and unreasonable authority. It was enough to worship a personal and good God, to believe He created a world that is getting better, to accept an ethical system whose precepts were as self-evident as the postulates of reason, and to make a clean sweep of those prejudices long darkening the emergence of a culture of universal reason. (Raphael, 1984, p. 6)

The emancipation brought many new opportunities for Jews to take their place in the economic, social and civic life of the larger communities in which they lived. France, Germany, Italy, and Holland Jews were given the right to vote and other civil liberties. In many places they could enter universities, work at almost any job they chose, and even accept public office (Meyer, 1988). Some argue that the Emancipation was really a contractual *quid pro quo*, not always left unspoken, in which Jews agreed to forsake their religious observance in return for civil rights and economic opportunities (Katz, 1972).

But Emancipation came at a high price for the Jewish community. Raphael (1984) explains that not all Jews reacted the same way to their change in status.

For some, Orthodox<sup>13</sup> Judaism seemed old-fashioned and out-of-date. These Jews moved further away from their Judaism as they embraced the European culture in which they were immersed:

Many German Jews inhaling the first breaths of the Enlightenment and Emancipation but painfully aware that their religion placed on them many *de facto*, and, in most places, still *de jure* disabilities, especially in career opportunities, chose the path of conversion. Others followed the same path not for political or professional advancement but because they found the Judaism of their ancestors—the only Judaism available in the 1790s and early 1800s anachronistic, unenlightened and unappealing. (Raphael, 1984, p. 6)

Others tried to change Judaism to meet the needs of the new life they were living. Reform Judaism was born in this effort and in the hope that changes would stop the wave of assimilation and conversion:

Reform Judaism offered Jews seeking to remain Jewish but simultaneously enthusiastically wrapped up in the Enlightenment an expression of Judaism that abolished much of the Mosaic legislation that many German Jews found meaningless and utterly outdated and that they viewed as separating themselves from their environment. It offered, in the vocabulary of the times, an "enlightened" religion which sought to stem the tide of conversion to Christianity by Jews estranged from what they perceived as the obsolete rituals of Judaism and frustrated by the discriminatory practices of their society. (Raphael, 1984, p. 7)

Initially, there was no Reform movement. Rather, there were individual synagogues throughout Germany (notably Seesen, Hamburg, and Berlin) trying to modernize Judaism and update religious worship (Meyer, 1988). The first Reform congregation was established in Seesen in 1810 by Israel Jacobson

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<sup>13</sup> Orthodox Judaism strictly follows the full tenets and regulations of Jewish law. Although the Orthodox wing of Judaism was by far the strongest in pre-World War I Europe, it met with severe problems when Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States and quickly adopted a less observant way of life. For many years, while the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist

(1768-1828). Jacobson articulated the following motivations for founding a new congregation:

- (1) to eliminate rituals, customs and prayers that he considered unenlightened, unintelligible and unaesthetic;
- (2) to arrange the manner of worship to fit contemporary standards of beauty, dignity, and taste;
- (3) to demonstrate to Protestants and Catholics in attendance that Judaism was as progressive, modern, and enlightened an expression of the common religion of humanity as any other faith; and
- (4) to bring back wayward Jews into the religious community of acculturated Israelites. (Raphael, 1984, p. 7)

In congregations like Jacobson's, sermons were delivered in German, choirs and organ music became a part of the service, and vernacular German prayers—as well as scriptural readings—were introduced. In addition, men and women sat together and there was a greater emphasis on slow congregational readings in unison. These individual synagogues wanted to make their services more modern in the hope that Jews would not be drawn to Protestant or Catholic churches. They differed substantially from Orthodox synagogues where the prayers were all recited in Hebrew, individuals often recited the liturgy at their own pace and no musical instruments were incorporated into the service.

As more synagogues in western Europe began to make similar changes, the rabbinic leadership sought to build cohesiveness and consistency by articulating authoritative principles of faith (Meyer, 1988; Plaut, 1963). The quest for such principles gained momentum as rabbis discussed how to accommodate Judaism

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movements grew, Orthodoxy was on the wane. In the last decade or so this trend has reversed, and Orthodox schools, synagogues, and groups are expanding in numbers and influence.

to the "spirit of the age" (Mendes-Flohr & Reinharz, 1980). Believing that Judaism was an evolving religion, one that would disappear if it were not kept up-to-date, one that needed constant reform and change, these rabbis gathered together at various conferences (Brunswick in 1844; Frankfurt in 1845; Breslau in 1846) to articulate a philosophy of Reform Judaism. *Mitzvot* and customs—such as the dietary laws, strict Sabbath and festival observance, and the exclusive use of only Hebrew for prayer—were changed or abandoned. These conferences marked the beginning of a Reform movement.

A history of Reform Judaism in Europe is inseparable from the active role of government authorities (Meyer, 1988; Plaut, 1963). In many instances, the growth of Reform Judaism was inhibited because of government intervention (Meyer, 1988). For example, the Prussian government closed the Berlin Reform Temple and forbade all changes and innovations in the ritual (Raphael, 1984). Similarly, later in the century, Prussian, Austrian, and Hungarian governments stopped Reform services.

[I]t did not want to promote sectarianism of any kind nor see Judaism vital and vibrant—and Reform Judaism might provide this very attractiveness to a new generation of Jews and their children. (Raphael, 1984, p. 7)

Clearly, such interference hindered the movement's free development. In other instances,

these same governments felt that any form of Judaism that might wean Jews away from the traditions of their ancestors and improve their image in the eyes of enlightened Christians ought to be supported. (Raphael, 1984, p. 7)

Unlike many places in Europe, where church and state were intertwined, the Reform movement grew and prospered in the United States. The liberal U.S.

spirit allowed for freedom of religious expression and thus, reformers faced fewer barriers in modernizing Judaism there than in Europe (Meyer, 1988; Raphael, 1984). As early as 1824, a group of Jews in Charleston, South Carolina, had their own liberalized service, leading the way for the first Reform congregation in the United States. Reform societies and temples were soon founded in Baltimore, New York, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Reform rabbis were generally imported from Western Europe.

These rabbis were responsible for reforming congregational practices in order to modernize the religion and prayer service. Many different forms of Reform Judaism co-existed at this time, as some rabbis wanted a radical reform, while others were eager to retain Jewish traditions (Plaut, 1965). Consequently, the extent of "reform" in each congregation varied (Meyer, 1988; Plaut, 1965; Raphael, 1984). As in Germany, a series of rabbinic conferences was convened to give the movement a greater coherence and direction (Plaut, 1965). Thus, common features emerged among early Reform congregations in America in the late 1800s.

All five installed an organ and a mixed choir; all introduced confirmation<sup>14</sup> ceremonies for boys and girls; all abolished the

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<sup>14</sup> Confirmation was originally a substitute for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. When the Temple stood Jews brought offerings of first fruits, *Bikurim*, to the Temple on Shavuot. Today, parents bring their children to participate in Confirmation. These young people are the first fruits of each year's harvest. They represent the hope and promise for the future. During the service the confirmands reaffirm their commitment to the covenant. The purpose of the ceremony is to encourage the intellectual and spiritual growth of young people who are approximately 16 or 17 years old. The ceremony contrasts to the traditional Bar mitzvah ceremony. The Bar Mitzvah is the occasion on which a boy is formally ushered into the adult Jewish community, and is expected to assume full religious duties, including responsibility for his own actions. The Bar Mitzvah is generally celebrated by a boy's being permitted to chant selections from the Bible aloud for the congregation. The Bat Mitzvah is a recent innovation first introduced less than 100 years ago.



second day of festivals<sup>15</sup> and substituted the triennial<sup>16</sup> Torah reading cycle for the traditional one-year format; and all made changes in the liturgy, including eliminating some prayers, and adding, in the vernacular, others. (Raphael, 1984, p. 11)

During this time, at least a half dozen rabbis produced their own prayer books (Meyer, 1988; Plaut, 1965). Because these prayer books were often used outside of the editor's congregation, many reform liturgies were developing. To solve the "disunion and dissension" that resulted from the multiplicity of prayer books, the Central Conference of American Rabbis established a committee to compile one central prayer book for the Reform movement (Plaut, 1965). The *Union Prayer Book* (the first official collectively-produced Reform liturgy) was published in 1892 (Meyer, 1988; Plaut, 1965; Raphael, 1984). A majority of congregations used this prayer book for almost 80 years (Hoffman, 1977; Meyer, 1988).

The *Union Prayer Book* (1892) is a drastically abbreviated version of the traditional prayer book. Unlike traditional Hebrew books which open from right to left (as Hebrew is read right to left), its two volumes opened from left to right as befitted a prayer book that was primarily in English. Meyer (1988) observes:

Necessarily, the prayer book also reflected the optimistic mood of late nineteenth-century America. "We rejoice that after the long, dreary night a new morn is dawning," the worshipers were asked to enthuse. "The truths revealed to Israel are becoming the possession of an ever greater number of men." p. 279)

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<sup>15</sup> The greatest change that the Sages made in the festival calendar was the addition of a day to each of the holidays ordained in the Torah, except *Yom Kippur*. This was done in around the first century. Compelling circumstances at that time forced the Sages to make this change. Reform Judaism from its very inception abolished the observance of a second day of the festivals and returned to the observance of the festivals as the Hebrew Bible prescribes.

<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew Bible, the single most important document in Jewish life, is read in synagogues throughout the year. The Sages divided the Hebrew Bible into portions so that each week in synagogue Jews read a portion of the Torah. Jews all over the world read the same portion of the Torah each week. In Reform and many Conservative congregations the entire portions are not read aloud.

The content of the *Union Prayer Book* also differed from the traditional prayer book. All references to exile and suffering are omitted. In addition, the editors rejected the sacrificial cult, a personal messiah, miracles, Zionism<sup>17</sup> (political and religious), and the doctrine of resurrection<sup>18</sup> of the dead. Individual petitionary prayers are not included in the *Union Prayer Book*, and very little Hebrew was incorporated into the service. Describing the prayer book, Raphael (1984) writes:

The liturgy is structured in a manner that enables rabbi and choir to conduct an esthetically beautiful and coherent service for the congregation—with the dignity and decorum of High Church Christianity—but one without opportunities for spontaneity, creativity . . . Both the Sabbath and high holiday services demand that the rabbi pray for the congregation, indicate that the worship is but a prelude to the essence of the service, the sermon, and maximize the opportunities for worshiper passivity in prayer and song. (p. 66)

The editors of the *Union Prayer Book* assumed that the congregation was to be prayed for, preached to, and sung at. By the 1950s and 1960s, many criticized the prayer book because it left worshippers passive, with little room for informality, spontaneity or creativity (Meyer, 1988; Raphael, 1984).

For American Reform Judaism, the 1970s was a period of intense liturgical change. During the two previous decades many Reform rabbis found the *Union Prayer Book* limiting (Meyer, 1988; Raphael, 1984). Struggling with the aftermath of the Holocaust, some Jews found the theological claim that God was an

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<sup>17</sup> In 70 C.E. the Romans exiled the Jewish people from their homeland. Since that time the land of Israel has always remained at the very center of Jewish consciousness. Throughout the centuries small numbers of Jews continued to live in the land of Israel, even under the most adverse circumstances. In modern times the commitment to a homeland was expressed not only through the liturgy but also through political action. Zionism is a political movement born in the 1800s. The goal of the movement was to establish a Jewish homeland in the land of Israel.

<sup>18</sup> Belief in resurrection is one of the 13 principles of faith enunciated by Moses Maimonides in the 12th century.

omniscient and omnibenevolent deity problematic. After all, if there was such a God why would that God have allowed the Holocaust to occur? Why didn't that God intervene in history? For others, the lack of traditional prayers and the archaic English rendered the book difficult to use. There was no consensus as to how to change the liturgy, although most Reform rabbis were looking for change. As a result, many congregations created their own prayer books:

Many of these liturgies initially developed around the weekly headlines (civil rights, brotherhood, opposition to the war, social justice); others consciously sought to deal with the theological problems of worshipers who disliked the idea of God contained in the *Union Prayer Book*, congregants who sought a greater amount of Hebrew as well as spontaneity, participation, and spirit, and the desire, by rabbis and those praying, for the use of a vernacular language that would speak to the "Me" or "Now" Generation. (Raphael, 1984, p. 67)

This plethora of "creative liturgy" formed the foundation of what became, in the 1970s, the first new Reform prayer book (Meyer, 1988; Raphael, 1984) in nearly a century: *Sha'are Tefilla—Gates of Prayer* (Stern, 1975).

*Gates of Prayer* (Stern, 1975) was well received almost immediately. Meyer (1988) asserts that "it was a compendium of multiple liturgies done by many hands" (p. 374). Reformers who wanted to incorporate more tradition into the service found it contained many of the traditional prayers and ideas. "In fact, in one form or another, in one place or another, the new prayer book contained nearly every classical theme" (p. 375). At the same time, the more radical Reformers' needs were also met by *Gates of Prayer*, which included innovative services, a lot of English, and some radical theology:

Because *Gates of Prayer* offered something for everyone and because at least some of the innovation possessed wide appeal, it was able—after some resistance—to win acceptance even in

temples where attachment to the earlier Reform prayer book was profound, especially among older congregants. The new prayer book represented—and celebrated—the diversity that, for better or worse, characterized the movement. (p. 375)

The new prayer book was intended to meet the changing needs of Reform Judaism in America. It presented choices drawn from the tradition that appealed to the liberally educated American Jew.

Our Jews are intelligent and informed, though they are still struggling with the Jewish aspect of their education . . . The events of the Holocaust and the birth of modern Israel stand foremost in their mind, but the increasing necessity for developing a synthesis of Americanism and Judaism is high on their agenda. As Reform Jews, they want to be free to draw nourishment from the totality of the Jewish tradition, be it Hasidic joy, Talmudic wisdom, philosophic wonder, Kabbalistic<sup>19</sup> mystery, prophetic idealism or liberal openness to experimentation and change. And they want to blend this with the best of modern culture: colloquial English, modern poetry, new music, American democracy, and the commitment (both Jewish and American) to an educated constituency. (Hoffman, 1977, pp. 162-163)

*Gates of Prayer* is an attempt to respond to the needs of the Jews who are using it. The American Reform Jewish community is well educated in secular studies and is searching for meaning. The assumption is that the people who pray from *Gates of Prayer* want to understand and relate to the prayers they are reciting. *Gates of Prayer* offers different religious services, allowing Reform Jews to choose for themselves an appropriate service.

The Reform movement continues to struggle with liturgy. *Gates of Prayer* is not "gender sensitive". God is regularly referred to as "He" or "Him". Also, central prayers describe God as the God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob

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<sup>19</sup> Kabbalah is Jewish mysticism. Jewish mystics believed that it was incumbent upon Jews to live in a state of sanctity, brotherhood, and unity. They believed that mystical doctrines were

and do not include the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. A gender sensitive version of *Gates of Prayer* has been published. In addition, in the next three or four years a new Reform prayer book is scheduled to be published with Rabbi Elyse Frishman as the editor. Specifics of the prayer book are not yet clear. But it is said to be offering more options from both traditional and contemporary liturgy, more transliterations and gender sensitive language.

### **Conservative Movement**

Most Conservative thinkers who write about the history of the movement (Davis, 1963; Gillman, 1993; Waxman, 1958; Wertheimer, 1997a; 1997b) claim that, as with the Reform movement, the foundation of the Conservative movement was established in Germany but that the major work was done by those on the American scene:

They [those on the American scene], themselves, were frequently the communicators of ideas rather than their inventors. But the ideas, having been distilled through their personalities and through the American environment, were more applicable and acceptable than the general formulations made, for example, in Germany. (Waxman, 1958, p. 41)

These scholars agree that the ideology of Conservative Judaism began with Zechariah Frankel in Germany. Frankel (1801-1875) argued that Judaism was a changing and developing entity which, through the ages, had recognized both the changing conditions of modernity and temper of the times. Throughout history, Frankel argued, Judaism had adjusted to these changes without sacrificing its own integrity. In explaining Frankel's philosophy, Waxman (1958) argues:

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given to Moses on Mount Sinai and are hidden in the Torah. The movement flourished in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

that Judaism historically was both mobile and static, that it must in measure adjust to the spirit of the time and in measure resist it, and that a conclusive factor in all judgments must be sensibility to the history, needs and unity of the Jewish people. (p. 7)

In 1854, Frankel became the first president of a new rabbinical school in Europe, the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau. The seminary was grounded in a "positive-historical" approach to Judaism. Frankel was "positive" because he wanted to preserve the commandments and Jewish law,<sup>20</sup> unlike the Reform movement. And he was "historical" because he believed that Judaism and its laws and institutions had grown and changed through the centuries, and that it was vital to study that historical growth so as to understand Judaism properly (Davis, 1963; Gillman; 1993; Waxman, 1958; Wertheimer, 1999).

While Frankel was willing to modify tradition, he was not willing to abandon it completely, as Raphael (1984) explains: Because Frankel was committed to

an historically evolving dynamic Judaism (in contrast to Orthodox), [he] viewed the essentials of Judaism, especially the law, through the prism of history (like the reformers) and feeling (unlike the

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<sup>20</sup> Jewish law is first recorded in the Five Books of Moses. In addition, there is an Oral Law, or legal commentary on the Torah, that explains how the commandments in the Torah are to be enacted. There are generally three ways in which the Oral Law can be illuminating. First, there are very few details in Torah legislation. For example, the Torah commands the Israelites to "Remember the Sabbath day to make it holy" (Exodus 20:8). Yet the Bible does not give specific laws regulating just how one is to observe the day. The bible prohibits lighting a fire, going away from one's dwelling, cutting down a tree, plowing and harvesting. Most of the laws associated with making the Sabbath holy are not found in the Torah but are found in the Oral Law. It is the Oral Law that describes candle lighting, reciting *kiddush*, a festive meal. Second, some laws are incomprehensible. For example in Genesis 2:24 we are told "Therefore shall a man leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife and they shall be one flesh." Nowhere in the Torah are the details of a marriage ceremony recorded. It is the Oral Law that provides the necessary details. And finally some laws in the Torah are objectionable. For example the Book of Exodus (21:24) demands a policy of an "eye for an eye." The Oral Law explains that the verse cannot be interpreted literally but must be understood as requiring monetary compensation: the value of an eye is what must be paid. Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox Jews recognize that when talking about Jewish law it is important to remember both the Written Law and the Oral Law. However only Orthodox Judaism believes that the Oral Law dates back to God's revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. According to Orthodox tradition, when God gave Moses the Torah, God simultaneously provided him all the details found in the Oral Law.

reformers). While the reformers applied primarily intellectual and historical criteria in deciding what to retain and what to abolish, Frankel asked not only what part a particular ritual, custom, belief, or law played in the people's past (for Frankel the past was a source of values, inspiration, and commitment) but also what the feeling and sentiment of the Jewish people of his own day was toward that item. (p. 86)

In his magnum opus, *Darkhei HaMishnah (Paths of the Mishnah)*, Frankel amassed considerable scholarly support for his contention that Jewish law had always developed in response to changing historical conditions (Gillman, 1993). Frankel argued that it was the Jewish community that was responsible for changing and shaping Jewish belief in practice (Davis, 1963; Gillman, 1993; Raphael, 1988; Waxman, 1958). In contrast to the polar positions of Reform and Orthodoxy, Frankel proposed a program of development that would be "carefully disciplined, academically justified and communally based" (Gillman, 1993).

Raphael (1984) asserts that:

Frankel's approach to Judaism was neither Reform or Orthodox. Although he shared much with . . . other reformers, he strongly disagreed with them over the legitimate criteria for religious change in his insistence on limiting the role that scientific scholarship, relevance, reason, and precedents for change might have in determining such change and in his deep commitment to traditional piety and observance. He also fought bitterly with the Orthodox over his view that the Oral Law (Tamud) was completely rabbinic in origin rather than Sinaitic, that this law (*halacha*) was dynamically evolved, and that the source of observance (e.g., the Sabbath) was not in the divine origin of the *halacha* but in the role the various rituals and observance had for the Jewish people over the centuries. (p. 87)

Though the positive-historical approach to Judaism did not enjoy wide success in Europe, it did in the U.S., thanks to leaders like Alexander Kohut, Sabato Morais, Israel Friedlander, and Solomon Schechter (Gillman, 1993;

Waxman, 1958). These men rejected the ideology of the Reform movement even though they were determined to modernize traditional practices.

Rabbi Alexander Kohut was ordained at the Breslau Seminary and served as a congregational rabbi in Europe before coming to the United States. Gillman (1993) claims that Kohut was largely responsible for transmitting the "positive-historical" approach to Judaism from Europe to the U.S. From his New York pulpit and in his writing, Kohut sharply attacked the emerging shape of the American Reform movement. In an article published in 1885 and reprinted in Waxman's (1958) *Tradition and Change*, Kohut writes:

The sphere of Reform must be limited . . . for the law must always be firmly established and irrevocable so far as concerns the revealed Law and Religion . . . . The true idea of Liberty excludes the idea of License. Development does not mean destruction. Recasting is a very different process from casting aside. (p. 73)

He introduced the term "Conservative" in the late 1800s at the opening exercises of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Raphael, 1984). The term referred to conserving or preserving Jewish tradition. In addition, it would be conservative in opposing the drastic changes of Reform while accepting less revolutionary but necessary changes.

If Kohut was the ideological father of Conservative Judaism in America, its institutional father is Sabato Morais (Gillman, 1993). In 1886, Morais gathered a group of supporters to create a new seminary for the training of traditional American rabbis. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America opened a year later with eight students. The new school made its purpose clear. It would be "faithful to Mosaic Law and ancestral tradition," and it would teach the Bible and



rabbinic literature faithfully, training its rabbis in Jewish knowledge, Hebrew language and Jewish law (Gillman, 1993; Raphael, 1984; Wertheimer, 1999).

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America continued to grow over time. In 1902, Solomon Schechter became its third president. Schechter was well suited for the position. He had a traditional Jewish education, practiced traditional Judaism, and had studied in institutions of western learning in Vienna and Berlin. Before accepting a position at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Schechter served as a Reader (lecturer) in Rabbinics at Cambridge. According to Raphael (1984), Schechter clearly articulated what the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and Conservative Judaism were all about: "Conservative Judaism unit[es] what is desirable in modern life with the precious heritage of our faith . . . that has come down to us from ancient times." (p. 88).

This blend of modernity and tradition is clearly seen in the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* (Silverman, 1946), the first official Conservative prayer book<sup>21</sup>. It is based upon the work of Rabbi Morris Silverman, who had compiled a prayer book for use in his own Hartford congregation. A Joint Prayer Book Commission, consisting of nine Conservative rabbis, edited Silverman's work. Like the leaders of the Reform movement, these editors struggled to make "prayer more palatable to the American Jew" (Waxman, p. 330). In their struggle, the editors were unwilling to alter the liturgy radically, for Hebrew language and the traditional organization of the prayers were seen as essential.

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<sup>21</sup> Before that time most Conservative congregations used prayer books generally identified as Orthodox, with none of the changes that have come to characterize Conservative liturgy.

Three fundamental principles guided the Commission in the preparation of the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* (Silverman, 1946): (1) maintaining traditional liturgy; (2) making the traditional liturgy more relevant; and (3) intellectual honesty. In certain instances, these principles represented competing commitments of the editors:

These basic principles, continuity with tradition, relevance to the modern age, and intellectual integrity, are obviously not easy to harmonize. The extent to which one or another principle ought to prevail in a given case will naturally be the subject of differences of opinion. Our procedure has varied with the circumstances involved in each instance. (Gordis cited in Waxman, 1958, p. 332)

Gordis explains that the Joint Prayer Book Commission was not willing to initiate all the changes necessary to make the prayer book more accessible to the modern Jew. For example, consider the concept of Israel as a people chosen by God. Because of the editors' commitment to continuity and tradition, they remained faithful to the idea of chosen people, a problematic idea for the modern Jew. To eliminate it from the prayer book because the modern Jew had trouble with the concept of chosen people was not acceptable to the Prayer Book Commission as:

it would mean surrendering to error and incidentally perpetrating an injustice upon the prophets and sages of Israel who understood the concept aright ....

In every instance the Prayer Book associates the election of Israel, not with any inherent personal or group superiority, but with the higher responsibilities which come to the Jew as the custodian of Torah and the devotee of the Jewish way of life. This is no modern reinterpretation, but an instance of the correct understanding of both the letter and the spirit of the tradition. (Gordis cited in Waxman, 1958, p. 333)

In other instances, changes were deemed necessary. For example, the traditional Hebrew prayer asking God to restore the sacrifices was altered to become a historical recollection of the ancient service. This change was introduced by leaving the entire paragraph intact, except for changing the tense of two verbs. Thus, instead of asking God to bring Jews back to their land where "we will once again bring the offerings [sacrifices] ordained for this day," a new and modified prayer asked that God bring Jews back to their land where "our forefathers brought the daily offerings" (Silverman, 1946 p. 141). Notice that in this case, the editors were willing to change the liturgy to make the traditional prayers more meaningful to the modern Jew who, in their view, could not possibly be praying for a time when animal sacrifices would be reinstated.

Similarly, the preliminary blessings that praise God "for not having made me a woman," "for not having made me a non-Jew" and "for not having made me a slave" were replaced by ones that praise God for having made me "in Thine image," "a Jew," and "a free person." Gordis (1946) explains:

These blessings express the sense of privilege that the Jew felt in being able to fulfill the Torah and the Mitzvot, which were not obligatory in equal measure for non-Jews, slaves and women. However, the negative form in which these blessings are couched caused Jewish leadership much concern through the ages. Supported by the trend of tradition, the Commission decided to rephrase the blessings in the positive form. (p. 335)

Once again, the Commission was willing to change the traditional prayers to make them more palatable to the modern Jew. The changes in the traditional liturgy that Gordis describes may seem trivial or insignificant to the Conservative Jew of the 1990s, but they were considered bold changes in the 1940s.

The *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* (Silverman, 1946) was the predominant prayer book in the Conservative movement for 40 years (Gillman, 1993). In 1985, *Siddur Sim Shalom* (Harlow, 1985) introduced more radical changes than the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book*. For example, rather than simply changing the tense of the verb pertaining to sacrifices, many more alternative versions of the traditional prayer referring to the restoration of the Temple service are added. None of the four alternatives ask God to allow the Jews to sacrifice to God in the future. The most traditional of the alternatives reads:

May it be Your will, Lord our God and God of our ancestors who restores His children to their land, to lead us in joy to our land and to settle our people within its borders. There our ancestors sacrificed to You with their daily offerings and with their special offerings, and there may we worship You with love and reverence as in days of old and ancient times. And the special offering for Shabbat they offered lovingly, according to Your will, as written in Your Torah through Moses, Your servant. (p. 447)

This prayer reminds the reader that Jews brought sacrifices to God in ancient times and asks that Jews one day be able to worship God with love and reverence. Notice the absence of any explicit request to reinstate sacrifices. *Sim Shalom* also includes alternative texts that abandon any reference to sacrifices. Compared to the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book*, anyone examining *Sim Shalom* cannot help but notice such radical changes.

Another strategy for handling problematic liturgical texts in *Sim Shalom* was to retain the traditional Hebrew and shade the translation in a way that would sidestep the problem. For example, in one of the concluding prayers included in all services, Jews praise God who "hath not made us like the pagans of the

world, nor placed us like the heathen tribes of the earth; He hath not made our destiny as theirs, nor cast our lot with all their multitude." This rather accurate translation of the Hebrew appears in the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book*. In *Sim Shalom*, the Hebrew was not changed at all, but the new English text praises God who "made our lot unlike that of other people, assigning to us a unique destiny."

Finally, *Sim Shalom* is more egalitarian than the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* (Silverman, 1946). In a prayer asking God to bless the congregation, the *Sim Shalom* text no longer asks for God to bless "this holy congregation. . . , them, their wives, their sons and their daughters." Women are now recognized to be members of "this holy congregation." In the introduction editor Jules Harlow (1985) indicates that:

the modifications, additions, and deletions which distinguish this prayer book affect a small portion of the classical texts of Jewish prayer. A Jew of ancient or medieval times familiar with Jewish prayer would be at home with the overwhelming majority of the Hebrew texts in this volume. We are linked to Jews of centuries past who have used the same liturgical formulations in addressing our Creator, confronting challenges of faith, and expressing gratitude and praise. (p. xx)

Notice that Harlow represents the prayer book as a traditional text, with a few minor changes. The Conservative movement's prayer book reflects the movement's commitment to traditional Judaism. Unlike the Reformers, who focused on the unique needs of the modern American Jew, the Conservative liturgists strove to maintain traditional liturgy.

## **Reconstructionist Movement**

The youngest of the religious movements in American Judaism is the Reconstructionist movement, which is based on the work of Mordecai Kaplan, who rejected both the Reform and Conservative approach to Jewish law and traditions. Born in 1881 in Poland, Kaplan immigrated to the United States when he was nine years old. In the U.S., Kaplan lived in both a Jewish and a non-Jewish world. He received a good Jewish and secular education, studying both at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and at New York's City College and Columbia University. Ordained a rabbi in 1902, Kaplan joined the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America just seven years later. First he trained Hebrew teachers and eventually joined the Rabbinical School faculty.

While on faculty at the Seminary, Kaplan studied and wrote about his understanding of Judaism. In 1922, he founded the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, a synagogue that served as a laboratory for developing his ideas about reconstructing Judaism and Jewish values. Describing Kaplan's work, Raphael (1984) claims that:

as a congregational rabbi, Kaplan tried to programmatically reconstruct Judaism. He believed that Judaism was not just a religion but a civilization. In 1917 the first story of a \$1-million synagogue-center was completed on West 86th Street, and Kaplan officially became the rabbi. He implemented a program of worship, study, and "meeting," and the latter included drama, song, dance, basketball, and calisthenics. (p. 180)

Almost 15 years later, Kaplan published *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), introducing a fully developed program for the reconstruction of Jewish theology, philosophy, ritual and communal life. In it, Kaplan presented his theory that the Jewish people—not God—should be seen as the center of Jewish life, and

everything must be done to preserve that people, even if it means discarding old ideas and values while creating new ones. Explaining Kaplan's philosophy, Raphael (1984) writes:

He proposed a "reconstructed" historical Judaism (thus its linkage to the Conservative Jewish wing) without supernatural revelation or supernatural "choosing" of the Jews, but with an abundance of customs, ceremonies, rituals, holidays, and festivals from the rich storehouse of Jewish tradition—all to be celebrated and observed for reasons other than that they were divinely revealed. (p. 181)

Kaplan argued that Judaism needed to be evaluated as the "civilization" or full expression of a people. He wanted to reconstruct Jewish tradition to accommodate modernity in the United States. He argued that Jewish practices and beliefs were created and shaped by community. For Kaplan, this ensured Judaism's survival. He was not disturbed that the community had such a powerful role in determining what Judaism would look like; rather, he understood the community's actions to be the work of God. Not the supernatural God of the Bible, but rather God as a process within nature and within human beings (Kaplan, 1934):

For Kaplan, "modern" Judaism was Judaism without supernaturalism, that is, without revelation, divine commandments, miracles, and chosenness. Such a Judaism is essentially, classical Judaism "reconstructed" in consonance with modernity, for Kaplan refuses to discard either Jewish rituals or the Jewish religion and, in fact, urges that they find their rightful place as the underpinning of Judaism as a civilization. (Raphael, 1984, p. 182)

Kaplan's radical ideas made him unpopular amongst the faculty at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Gillman, 1993). For a short time, he even considered teaching at the Reform movement's Jewish Institute of Religion. But his ideology was distinctly different from the Reform movements and, as a result,

he could not join its faculty. Unlike the Reformers, Kaplan did not abandon Jewish nationhood as a dimension of Jewish identity. A committed Zionist, he did not believe Judaism was just a religion. In addition, unlike the Reformers, Kaplan was a traditionally observant Jew. While he was willing for the community to reconstruct Jewish practices and beliefs, he was not willing to discard all of traditional Judaism.

For most of Kaplan's career, he was reluctant to introduce a new independent movement to the American Jewish scene (Gillman, 1993). Kaplan wanted Reconstructionist Judaism to be a school of thought influencing North American Judaism rather than a fourth denomination (Raphael, 1984). He remained on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America until 1963, trying to create a Reconstructionist following within the Conservative movement. Ultimately, however, he realized that in order to spread his ideas and programs, he could not work within in the Conservative or Reform movement and so founded the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in the late 1960s (Raphael, 1984).

The Reconstructionist movement, while smaller than either the Conservative or Reform movement, has influenced both. Raphael (1984) explains that scores of Conservative rabbis continue to acknowledge their

indebtedness to their former teacher, Kaplan, and to Reconstructionism for stimulating their thinking on numerous issues. In addition, Reconstructionism played a major role in shaping the ideas of Reform Judaism, especially the notion that Judaism includes a cultural component, that naturalist theology is legitimate, and that Jewish communal democracy must be continuously affirmed and implemented. (p. 193)

*The Reconstructionist Prayer Book* (Kaplan & Kohn, 1945) offered Conservative and Reform Jews an alternative understanding of God. In its



introduction, the editors explain that the prayer book was compiled primarily for those who were not at home in the synagogues and temples of that time. The purpose of the prayer book was to offer meaningful prayers for the modern Jew who found services meaningless. As a result, many traditional passages were eliminated and inspirational readings were added.

Kaplan's approach to the liturgy was a simple one: "If you don't believe it, don't say it" (Gillman, 1993 p. 80). In the introduction to the Reconstructionist prayer book, the editors explain that a prayer book must:

Be reverential of the traditional worship-text

Draw generously on those vast resources of historic Judaism which have hitherto not been tapped

Take clear cognizance of the problems and aspirations of mankind and Jewry today

Exhibit courage . . .to set aside or modify such prayers or phrases as are unacceptable to modern men, whether intellectually, morally, or aesthetically. (Kaplan & Kohn, 1945, p. xviii)

The Reconstructionist prayer book, therefore, eliminated all references to the resurrection of the dead, the Chosen People, and the personal Messiah.<sup>22</sup> It dropped the middle paragraph of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 11:13-21) because the editors no longer believed that a person's behavior influences rain or drought.

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<sup>22</sup> The traditional outlook of Judaism is that the Messiah will be the dominating figure of an age of universal peace and plenty. Through a restored Israel, the Messiah will bring about the spiritual regeneration of humanity, when all will blend into one brotherhood to perform righteousness and with a perfect heart. The prophet Zechariah (14:9) explains that "on that day [when the Messiah has arrived] the Lord shall be One and his name one." The Jewish liturgy is replete with references to the messianic hopes and aspirations.

It also dropped the entire *Musaf*<sup>23</sup> service because it evokes the additional sacrifice of the Sabbath and modern Jews no longer need to pray for a return to the Temple cult with its sacrificial system.

In 1994, the Reconstructionist Press published a new Reconstructionist prayer book, *Kol Haneshamah*, which means "all with the breath of life." David Teutsch, chair of a committee that edited the new prayer book, argued that there was a need to publish the new prayer book because the situation of North American Jewry had changed so much since the 1940s:

Then Jews were struggling to assimilate into North American society. Today many North Americans are trying to find their way into Judaism. In the 1940s the horror of the Holocaust and the emergence of the State of Israel had not yet redefined the Jewish sense of self, and the ethnic awakening of Jews had not yet begun. The language of prayer had not yet been affected by the growing informality of American manners. Changes in women's roles had not yet had a major influence. There was no way of anticipating the smaller groups that would join in prayer, the return to lay leadership in worship, and the growing desire for a sense of inclusion ... English usage, too, has changed considerably in the last forty years. (Teutsch, 1994, p. xxi)

Teutsch is arguing that a prayer book must reflect the Jewish community's experiences, whether those experiences involve how the English language is used, the role of women, the Hebrew skills of the community, or the reality that they encounter. Unlike the traditional Jew who believes the liturgy is static, Teutsch argues that the prayer book changes to accommodate the times.

The differences between *Kol Haneshamah* and Kaplan's *Sabbath Prayer Book* include transliterations, commentaries, English readings, alternative versions of many traditional prayers, and gender-sensitive language. The new prayer book was intended to

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<sup>23</sup> *Musaf* is an additional service that is recited on the Sabbath, festivals, and first day of a new month. The additional service is reminiscent of the additional sacrifice that was brought to the Temple on those days.

meet the needs of Jews "who are finding their way to fuller Jewish lives despite scanty Jewish education and scarce memories of powerful experiences of worship and ritual." (Teutsch, 1994, p. xx)

*Kol Haneshamah* is thus the most recent example of the struggle of all three movements – Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist – to make sense of the traditional liturgy in the context of the opposing forces of emancipation and Jewish tradition. Each movement has published at least two prayer books. The Reform prayer book reflects a commitment to social action and to reforming the liturgy (Hoffman, 1977). The Conservative Sabbath prayer book came into being in 1946 and emphasized tradition, but modernized it to match American aesthetics—exactly the self-image of Conservative Jews moving to the suburbs (Sklare, 1972). Although a separate Reconstructionist movement was not founded until the late 1960s, Mordecai Kaplan published a Reconstructionist prayer book (Kaplan & Kohn, 1945) in which a radical conception of God as a natural force within the universe was introduced.

### **Liberal Jews' Struggle with the Traditional Liturgy**

Thus far we have considered the history and liturgical changes of the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movement. In this section, the roots of the contemporary liberal Jew's struggle with the traditional liturgy is explored. Once the nature of the contemporary liberal Jew's struggle with prayer is better understood, we can begin to investigate the challenges in teaching prayer in a liberal supplementary school setting. There are three main reasons for these

struggles: (a) the Hebrew language; (b) *keva* versus *kavannah*<sup>24</sup>; (c) theological problems. Each is discussed in turn.

### **The Hebrew Language**

According to the Sages, it was critical for the pray-er<sup>25</sup> to understand the prayer. The Mishnah (Sotah 7:1), a second century codification of Jewish law recorded by Rabbi Judah, explains: "These may be said in any language . . . the *Shema*, the *Amidah* and the Blessings After Meals." Although Jewish law does not demand that prayer be offered in Hebrew, traditional Jewish prayers were composed in Hebrew.

According to the Conservative movement, Hebrew is an essential aspect of for Jewish prayer. Hammer (1994) argues that an emotional element is added to the experience when prayers are recited in Hebrew, even if the pray-er does not comprehend every word:

There is a feeling of identification with an ancient tradition and with other Jews wherever they may be which enhances the experience of prayer. There is nothing magical in Hebrew, but there is something culturally meaningful that is lost when traditional prayers are said in other languages. (p. 13)

There is also a sense of historical rootedness. Though Hebrew has not been the spoken language of the Jewish people throughout most of their history, it is the language of the Bible and many sacred texts. Like any language, Hebrew has certain allusions and culturally specific imagery. As a result, the fullest meaning

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<sup>24</sup> *Keva* is the Hebrew word for "fixed", deriving from the root "permanent." *Keva* means that the words of prayers are fixed, permanent paths to guide our praying. *Kavannah* is the Hebrew word for "intention", deriving from the root "point" or "aim." *Kavannah* is when you "aim" your heart and really mean something with all your feelings.

<sup>25</sup> I use this term pray-er to refer to the person engaged in the act of praying.

of a particular text lies in its original language. The terms that are used, the multiple meanings and echoes within them, can seldom be fully conveyed in translation. For example, in the prayer book, God is described as being *kadosh*. The word *kedushah* (holy) comes from the word *kadosh*, meaning set apart, unique, separate, holy, special. The word *kedushah* is rich in associations from Jewish literature and culture. On Friday evenings, Jews take wine and recite the *kiddush*, a blessing which declares the next 25 hours *kadosh*. The blessings recited at a wedding ceremony are known as the blessings of *kiddushin*, for they create the sacred union of a man and a woman. When praying in the synagogue, Jews face the *Aron HaKodesh*, the holy ark. In many blessings, Jews recognize God as the "One who has sanctified us with God's commandments—*asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav*." Finally, in the book of Leviticus, God challenges the Jewish people *kedoshim tihiyu*, "make yourselves holy."

In all of these instances, the word *kadosh* suggests a God-like behavior or relationship. Knowing Hebrew allows one to see the interconnections and relationships. The English translation does not conjure up the linguistic roots nor the imagery or and emotional impact of the word *kadosh*.

In addition to conveying a richer meaning, praying in Hebrew allows the pray-er to identify with an ancient tradition and with Jews all over the world. Dorff (1992) suggests that although Jews may not know the Hebrew language, praying together in Hebrew helps create bridges for Jews worldwide. To illustrate this point, he cites Elie Weisel's *Jews in Silence*. Wiesel describes being in synagogue on Yom Kippur in Moscow as he tried to speak in Yiddish with the

Russian Jews surrounding him. They pretended not to understand him: "It was only when I began to pray aloud, in witless desperation, that the barriers fell. The Prince of Prayer had come to my aid. They listened closely, then drew nearer; their hearts opened" (cited in Dorff, 1966, pp. 19-22).

Conservative ideology has always considered Hebrew to be the language of the liturgy. In *Darkhei HaMishnah*, Frankel pleaded for retaining Hebrew, arguing that Jewish history demanded that Hebrew continue to be the language of Jewish prayer. Traditionalists who advocated retaining prayer in Hebrew recognized that Hebrew is rich with biblical and literary allusions. An example of such a literary allusion is the "Song of the Sea" (Exodus 14:30-15:19), which is included in the early morning portion of the weekday and Sabbath morning service. This dramatic poem expresses both praise and faith in God. It is a song of triumph sung after the Israelites successfully crossed the Red Sea. Most people reciting the text probably do not recognize the historical or Biblical references, let alone the poem's many literary allusions. They certainly do not realize that the well-known Hebrew text *Mi Khamokha* (Who is Like God), found a few pages later, comes directly from this poem.

Leaders of the Reform movement originally rejected Hebrew as the primary language of worship, embracing the vernacular instead (Petuchowski, 1977). There were two reasons for this decision (Mendes-Flohr & Reinhartz, 1980). First, after the Enlightenment, as Jews were welcomed into the secular world, many abandoned learning in traditional Jewish schools where Hebrew was prevalent. As a result, Hebrew was increasingly unintelligible to many Jews. In addition,

until the Emancipation, Jews had looked at themselves and had been looked upon by others as a separate nation. The message of the Emancipation was that they could be citizens and active participants of the nations in which they lived. As a result, reformers rejected the use of Hebrew because it was the national language of the ancient commonwealth of Israel. As an expression of Jewish national identity and nationalism, Hebrew was a problem for Reform Judaism in the years following the Emancipation (Meyer, 1988). By conducting services in English, Reform Jews tried to minimize the national aspects of Judaism.

The Reform movement—and its orientation toward Hebrew—has changed a great deal since its early beginnings.<sup>26</sup> While worship was once conducted almost exclusively in the vernacular, now most Reform congregations incorporate some Hebrew into their service. Once Hebrew became a part of worship, many Reform Jews were frustrated because they knew little or no Hebrew and, as a result, could not understand the liturgy. Addressing how lack of Hebrew knowledge affects the liberal community, Jakob Petuchowski (1977), a Reform liturgist, described the modern Jew's problem with traditional prayer:

The worshipper without the requisite background in Hebraic scholarship can only experience the height of boredom during the recitation of the *piyyutim* [poetic prayers], a boredom which will lead to conversation with his neighbor, and to an inevitable disturbance of the decorum. Or—and this is hardly any better—he may devoutly recite page after page of words which are utterly incomprehensible to him, regarding them as some kind of magical incantation. (p. 21)

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<sup>26</sup> For example regarding statehood, in 1976 the movement formally embraced the State of Israel. "We are privileged to live in an extraordinary time, one in which a third Jewish commonwealth has been established in our people's ancient homeland. We are bound to that land and to the newly reborn State of Israel by innumerable religious and ethnic ties" (A Centenary Perspective cited in Borowitz 1983, p xxiii)

Petuchowski's assumption about the Reform Jew's inability to understand the liturgy is right on the mark. While he is describing the situation in the Reform temples, his comments apply to most Jews worshipping in liberal congregations.

### **Keva Versus Kavannah**

Jewish tradition recognizes that the individual will not always feel moved to pray. As a result, the Sages structured prayer, by prescribing *keva*, a required schedule for praying. Though the time was fixed, originally the specific prayers were not. Scholars of the liturgy believe that prayer was originally intended to be a spontaneous outpouring of the individual (Petuchowski, 1977). The content of that verbal expression was to be based on a set of fixed topics said in a certain order. Prayers would vary according to the individual's ability to write prayers. This process was slow and the innovative personal side of the prayers remained present for many years (Holtz, 1990). Over time, the liturgy became fixed. Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of prayer for liberal Jews is that the text has become set. This rigidity is troubling for many, and yet commitment to the text of the prayer book is an essential element of Jewish prayer.

Even so, Jewish prayer is not just mechanical. It also requires *kavannah*—not only concentration but meaning and intention—when expressing ourselves before God. Judaism acknowledges that there is an impulse to pray and the spontaneous words a person addresses to God are a form of prayer (Dorff, 1992; Hoffman 1988; Petuchowski, 1977). The Jewish tradition recognizes that most people periodically find themselves wanting to pray. This is especially true when they want to express joy or anguish at critical moments in their lives. Or when



they are in need. Their free outpourings of the heart may not come from the traditional liturgy, but they are authentic Jewish prayers.

This tension between the fixed nature of prayer and the need for spontaneity in prayer is articulated in traditional Jewish sources. The Mishnah (*Berachot* 4:4) quotes a definitive statement by one Sage: "If a man makes his prayer a fixed task, it is not a [genuine] supplication." The Talmud (*Berachot* 29b) later defines "a fixed task" as prayers that consist of an established liturgy with nothing new added. Clearly, the early Sages worried about reconciling these two conflicting requirements of worship. On the one hand, they knew true worship demanded the spontaneous outpouring of the human heart. Rote-like prayer would lack sincerity and meaning. On the other hand, the Sages realized that meaningful prayer experiences do not just happen spontaneously; they must be planned.

Holtz (1990) argues that the set liturgy provides certain themes essential for Jewish worship. It is like a collective and cultural autobiography "ghosted" by another. The traditional prayers are the words Jews should want to say if they were capable of writing eloquent prayers:

Therefore, although they are words that can help us or guide us, our relationship to that language is different from our relationship to words of our own choosing. What we seek to develop, then, is a more flexible stance in our personal connection to the words of prayer. The liturgy, in other words, is there to assist us; rather than letting our difficulties with the words hinder us, our goal should be to attain the ability to go beyond the words while at the same time taking advantage of what they have to offer us. ( pp. 119-120)

He explains further:

The tradition provides the melody, so to speak, but our own personal improvisation upon the melody varies it, changes it, makes it different perhaps from its original intention, but it makes the song our own. (p. 120)

The challenge, Holtz asserts, is for the liberal Jew is to figure out how that improvising can occur.

It has been my experience that Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations all struggle with the tension between *keva* and *kavannah*. Each movement addresses the issue a bit differently. In Conservative congregations, the fixed liturgy of the prayer book is both a blessing and an obstacle. It is a blessing because it is a great educational tool, as Dorff (1992) indicates:

By following the course of the set liturgy, the Jew is taught and reminded of some of the primary values and tenets of Judaism in the context of emotionally inspirational words and music. This enables Jewish prayer to be morally and educationally enriching as well as emotionally expressive. (p. 153)

Prayer—like ritual objects and acts of all sorts—helps us to remember our commitments so that we have a better chance to make them a part of our lives. (p. 171)

Yet, the text is also an obstacle. Unwilling to part from the text of the *Siddur*, Conservative Jews often experience prayer as mechanical and boring (Gillman, 1990). For the most part, Conservative Jews have forgotten, or do not know, that spontaneity was once an essential element of Jewish prayer (Holtz, 1990).

Reform and Reconstructionist congregations experience the tension between *keva* and *kavannah* a bit differently. In some settings, rabbis freely change the liturgy, thus abandoning the *keva* of prayer. Sometimes the blueprint of the service is changed, so that the traditional themes and structure are abandoned. Other times, the blueprint is maintained but the traditional prayers are replaced with new readings or prayers, which are more accessible to the modern Jew.

Often these innovations themselves become fixed. This is problematic. Ironically, these English responsive readings or abridged prayers (created to

make praying more accessible to all congregants) can become so set that there is no room for spontaneity. Petuchowski (1968) writes: "One generation's expression of *kavanah* becomes the next generation's heritage of *keva*" (p. 15). I have observed another problem: Many rabbis and cantors are creating their own liturgy, abandoning any commitment to a fixed liturgy, changing the service from week to week. I wonder if congregants yearn for more *keva* in their services, as repetition might help them learn the prayers and allow them to find a deeper meaning in the liturgy. Future research in Jewish education might take on such inquiries, probing the interests, perspectives, and needs of congregants. While not the focus of this dissertation, such research would have much promise for contributing to Jewish education.

### **Theological problems**

One central theological challenge for liberal Jews involves the disjunction between our modern attitudes toward God and those who wrote or edited the prayer book. Holtz (1990) looks closely at *Nishmat Kol Hai* (The Breath of Every Living Thing), one of the central hymns of the Sabbath and festival morning service, as an example. Placing the hymn in context, Holtz cites scholar Joseph Heinemann, who claimed that the text was "the most exalted and eloquent prayer in the hymnic style to be found in the statutory liturgy" (p. 115). The translated hymn follows:

The breath of every living thing  
shall praise your name, O Lord our God,  
and every mortal being  
shall ever glorify and exalt your deeds, O our  
King. From eternity to eternity  
You are our God.

And we have no one but You as our King,  
our Redeemer, our Savior, our Deliverer  
in every time of trouble and distress.  
God of first things and of last things,  
Lord of all creatures, Master of all generations You are endlessly  
praised.

If our mouths were filled with song  
as the sea  
and our tongue with joyful praise  
as the roaring waves;  
were our lips full of adoration  
as the wide expanse of heaven,  
and our eyes sparkling  
like the sun or moon;  
were our hands spread out in prayer  
as the eagles of the sky,  
and our feet swift as the deer—  
we should still be unable to thank you  
and bless Your name,  
Lord our God.

Therefore  
the limbs which you have given us  
and the spirit and soul which You have breathed into our nostrils  
and the tongue which You have placed in our mouths—all join in  
giving thanks and in praising Your name, O our King. (pp. 115-117)

Holtz (1990) describes *Nishmat Kol Hai* as a journey of self-discovery. First, the hymn establishes that God is "our King, our Redeemer, our Savior, our Deliverer in every time of trouble and distress." By describing God's omnipotence, the writer leads us to critical questions: If God is omnipotent and God is both the master and source of language, then who are we to praise God? And how will we find the proper words to bless God? Our inadequacy is overwhelming. But, as Holtz points out, the author of the hymn concludes that we can praise God because "it is God who has given us the ability to pray." By acknowledging that God enables us to pray, the individual becomes capable of praising God. Thus, in the third section it is no longer our limbs, but rather "the

limbs which You have given us." It is not our tongue, but rather "the tongue which You have placed in our mouths." Holtz concludes that, according to *Nishmat*, we can pray because God allows us to. God is the source of prayer. God is the source of our strength. The perspective that the author of *Nishmat Kol Hai* assumes is difficult for the modern liberal Jew, who has confidence in humanity's abilities but doubts and questions God's existence.

In earlier times when Jews were struggling with prayer, they felt inadequate to pray to God, but the liturgy does not suggest that they ever doubted God's existence. Their doubt focused on their ability to speak before their Creator. Before the modern era, prayer was an address to God, and God heard and responded. Modernity, Holtz (1990) asserts, is accompanied by doubt that makes prayer problematic. Modern Jews are troubled, for making a request of God assumes that God will answer our requests. Thanking God for something assumes that God is responsible for what happened. Praising God assumes that God exists. Such beliefs are not so easy to hold in the modern world.

Recently, a great deal has been written about contemporary liberal Jews' struggle with traditional Jewish prayer (Ariel, 1988, 1995, 1998; Dorff, 1992; Gillman, 1990; Goldman, 1991; Gordis, 1995; Hammer, 1994; Heschel, 1954; Hoffman, 1997, 1998; Holtz, 1990, 1993; Kamenetz, 1994; 1997; Kushner, 1989; Schulweis, 1994; Staub, 1996; Wieseltier, 1998; Wolpe, 1990, 1992, 1993).

Wolpe (1990) describes the situation for contemporary liberal Jews:

Questions of whether Judaism can stand without the God-Idea and attempts to redefine God in impersonal terms are part of a general struggle to understand anew the nature of Judaism. Is it a religion? Is it a people, a nationhood, a civilization? If Judaism is something

more than a religion, can God be erased or ignored? Suspending definitional entanglements, we may simply ask: how central is God to Judaism?

Many modern Jews will give an obligatory nod but insist that the centrality of Judaism lies elsewhere. Conceding that God was at one time the fulcrum of Judaism, they maintain that in our day the balance has shifted. Now the people of Israel are the true focus of Judaism. . . . the land of Israel, revived by historical legerdemain and massive sacrifice, . . . God is not central because, we are told in those hard dichotomies so beloved of people who come out on the right side, Judaism is a religion of action, not belief, centered in this world, not standing with its head thrust in clouds, that for all their loveliness, do obscure vision...

While God is acknowledged as part of the redoubtable triad—God, Torah, and Israel—some are convinced that one leg can be removed and still the structure, in a neat twist of metaphysical carpentry, stays standing. (p. 4)

Wolpe recognizes that the modern liberal Jew is struggling with the idea of God. Rather than acknowledging God as central to Judaism, modern liberal Jews are wondering if Judaism can be redefined, with Israel in the center, especially given the extraordinary historical circumstances that led to the founding of the state of Israel.

The liberal Jew is faced with many other theological questions. To whom does one pray? Does God hear prayers? If so, will God answer them? If prayer is not heard and answered by God, then why pray? Why would an omniscient God need us to articulate our prayers? Shouldn't God just know what we are thinking? These questions are not easily answered and often prevent a liberal Jew from praying (Dorff, 1992). Why are liberal Jews asking so many difficult questions? Why don't they have the faith in God that their ancestors had? Why is the one leg of the triad—God—being challenged?

There are several reasons for this erosion of faith. First, Western culture is grounded in scientific inquiry that depends upon knowledge, critical questioning, empirical data, and belief based upon evidence. Following Emancipation, Jews eagerly embraced opportunities to study secular subjects and pursue heretofore off-limits professional endeavors. They achieved notable success, but acceptance in the intellectual milieu of the university and the salon often required abandonment of belief based on faith, habit, religious tradition or accidents of circumstance. For many Jews, the logic behind forsaking obligations to an unproven God proved irresistible.

Perhaps one reason for this erosion of faith is that liberal American Jews live in a social and cultural milieu where faith does not uniformly play a major role. The environment of material abundance and popular culture do not lend themselves to faith. In addition, for liberal American Jews, attendance at college or university is the norm. The paradigm of the modern American university looks down upon determining one's beliefs about academic subjects based upon faith, habit, religious traditions and accidents of circumstance. That suspicion of unsupported beliefs can easily leak into one's personal life as well.

Yet another reason why contemporary liberal Jews struggle with these traditional images of God is because in traditional Judaism, God is the King and the Jewish people are servants, obligated to fulfill God's commandment. The Enlightenment repudiated the divine right of kings. As a result, contemporary liberal Jews do not see themselves as servants but as individuals with rights. Traditional understandings of God reject this view of the world, claiming that God

can be arbitrary, God is all powerful, and mortals have no way of understanding exactly what is God's will.

In the modern period, Jews have felt an increasing distance from the God described in the traditional liturgy: God as Creator, Revealer, and Redeemer. Scientific inquiry about how the world was created, and how the universe functions raises many questions about God for many modern liberal Jews.

Yet another challenge to traditional theology was the murder of six million Jews during the Second World War. Contemporary Jewish theologians have been forced to ask hard questions about God's role in history. How could a merciful God permit these unspeakable horrors? What was God's purpose for the mass murder of so many millions of innocent people? Most contemporary liberal theologians reject the traditional notion of an active personal God who is responsible for reward and punishment. For example, the extreme view of one modern Jewish theologian, Richard Rubinstein (1966), is that God is dead. If God is not dead, at least belief in God is dead because there is no good answer to the vexing question, "Why did God not intervene to prevent the suffering?"

Still, for many, the Holocaust has not succeeded in undermining faith in God. Many American Jews believe in God, but they do not always turn to God in a Jewish setting like the synagogue. In a study of the American Jewish community, Cohen and Eisen (2000) found that:

The Jews we interviewed overwhelmingly believe in God, far more so than we would have expected or that survey data about American Jews led us to believe. They are also surprisingly content with, and even fondly attached to, their synagogues. But they rarely make any straightforward connection between the two. God for them is a Being or Force who/which they encounter as individual



human beings rather than as Jews. . . . When they come to synagogue, it is to enjoy the pleasures of Jewish community and of attachment to Jewish tradition. God is rarely sought or found there, and is certainly not brought near by the words of the prayer book, which—to our subjects at least—rarely carry personal significance. (p. 11)

American Jews, then – according to Cohen and Eisen—may come to synagogue for many reasons: spirituality, personal awareness, moral aspiration, community or perhaps tradition. But they do not necessarily come to synagogue because the liturgy inspires them or because they expect to encounter God. While one might not agree with the researchers' conclusions, Cohen and Eisen's research is intriguing nonetheless, for they claim that American Jews might believe in a God and yet make no direct connection between God and the prayer book or the synagogue. In part, this may be due to the fact that the God in the prayer book is very difficult to understand for many Jews today. The words of the liturgy do not reflect what they believe. As a result, these scholars claim, "they are distinctly uncomfortable with the act of prayer" (p. 155).

## **Conclusion**

Worship has always been embedded in the fabric of Jewish life. In the ancient world, animal sacrifices, psalms and spontaneous prayer allowed human beings to feel closer to God. With the destruction of the Second Temple and exile, which forced an end to the Temple cult and sacrifices, synagogue and prayer assumed a new central role in Jewish life, with the reading of the biblical portions describing the sacrifices substituting for the actual sacrifices.

Thus, for more than 2,000 years, Jews have relied upon a set liturgy to worship God. Modern Jews—particularly since the early 1800's—have struggled with this ancient liturgy. Yet, despite the introduction of many changes in both form and content, they have yet to create a framework for prayer that resonates broadly among the majority of contemporary Jews.

The question then arises: Is this failure to resonate primarily due to the theological and other reasons outlined above for liberal Jews' struggle with the traditional liturgy, or is it perhaps due, at least in part, to our failure to properly teach prayer?

Despite the centrality of praying to Judaism, little scholarship exists on teaching of prayer. Historically, formal school settings have not included prayer in the traditional Jewish curriculum. Traditional Judaism assumed that boys would learn the prayers by praying with their fathers and that girls would absorb any liturgy they needed to know from their mothers. Consider the Mishnah, where a boy's studies are outlined. Yehudah ben Tema states:

At five years of age—the study of Bible, at ten—the study of Mishnah, at thirteen—responsibility for the *mitzvot* [commandments], at fifteen—the study of Talmud. (Pirke Avot 5:23)<sup>27</sup>

The text does not specify when liturgy should be studied formally. The assumption was that children would learn to pray, not that they would study the liturgy.

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<sup>27</sup> When referring to texts from the *Mishnah* it is customary to cite by chapter and verse, not by page number.

The reality of Jewish life changed considerably in the modern period. Yehudah ben Tema's teaching no longer described the Jewish studies of the typical American Jewish boy or girl. In the next chapter, I describe how the teaching of prayer developed in liberal Jewish supplementary schools in the wake of these cultural, religious, and social shifts.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS: FROM TALMUD TORAH TO BAR MITZVAH PRELUDE**

As Jews assimilated in American society, many still sought ways to maintain and develop their Jewish identity. The response of the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements to modernity articulated in their prayer books - as we saw in the last chapter – illustrate the diversity of theological and practical religious issues that have dominated liberal Jewish thought for more than two centuries. Supplemental schools and their approaches to teaching prayer offer another window through which we can view that same struggle. Most Jews sent their children to public schools and created supplemental schools to educate them about Judaism. This chapter examines how prayer was taught in supplementary religious schools in the United States during the last century.

There are many potential foci for such an analysis. My analysis focuses on how the teaching of prayer developed in liberal Jewish supplementary schools, for that is the object of this inquiry. We begin by examining two large-scale waves of Jewish immigration to this country. While the structure and focus of the schools established by each group differed, both recognized the need for supplementary schools where Jewish studies would be taught.

The first wave of Jewish immigrants, between 1848 and 1880, brought 200,000 Jews from central Europe. The second, which began in 1881 and lasted until 1924, brought an additional two million more Jews from Eastern Europe to the United States. Both groups of immigrants embraced the public schools and developed supplementary schools to complement the public school system. We

begin with an overview of the two major waves of Jewish immigration, the schools they founded followed by a discussion of the trends in American Jewish life that led to the creating of congregational supplementary schools. The chapter concludes by describing how prayer was taught in the congregational supplementary school through the 1960s.

## **Jewish Immigration to the United States**

### **First Wave 1848 – 1880: Central European Jews Embrace America**

The first large-scale wave of Jewish immigration began in 1848 as political conditions in central Europe deteriorated. These immigrants came mostly from Germany, Bohemia, Moravia, and Posen (Hertzberg, 1989). By 1880, approximately 200,000 had come to the United States (Hertzberg, 1989; Karp, 1985). These immigrants were poor and not particularly religiously observant. They embraced their new homeland and were eager to make a place for themselves.

In his popular 1868 novel *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*, Matthew Hale Smith described the religious observance of Central European immigrants:

Chatham Street is the bazaar of the lower Jews. It is crowded with their places of trade, and over their stores they generally live. Noisy and turbulent, they assail all who pass, solicit trade, and secure general attention and general contempt. They know no Sabbath. On Saturday, their national Sabbath, they keep open stores because they live in a Christian country. On Sunday they trade because they are Jews. (Smith cited in Karp, 1985, pp. 121-122)

Transplanted from their villages where the culture supported their religion, these immigrants responded to the foreign American culture by abandoning their holy Sabbath in order to keep their stores open on the busiest days of the week.

Economic success was their primary concern and some scholars have argued that they were willing to abandon traditional Jewish practices so they could prosper. Other changes were introduced so that Judaism would not look so different from Christianity. In synagogues, men and women sat together, organs were introduced, and prayer was offered in English. The American Judaism of this wave of immigrants was thus reactive, compromising itself in order to fit more comfortably with the non-Jewish majority (Hertzberg, 1989).

Of course, in the absence of scholarship that explores the intentions and experiences of those immigrants, it is impossible to conclude that this was the case. As is the case with all historical research, we are dependent on the records left of these immigrants. We cannot possibly know – for certain – their desires, motivations, and experiences as they faced the challenge of holding onto their cultural and religious traditions while trying to successfully adapt to their new environment.

Thus, there are many unanswered questions about the experiences of these immigrants. For instance, Sama (1995) rejects the argument that all Central European immigrants were willing to reform Jewish practices to assimilate. Rather, he suggests that while these immigrants were initially willing to reform Judaism, many became part of a 'revival,' 'awakening,' or a 'renaissance' in American Jewish life. Ironically perhaps, Sama argues that this trend toward more religion was not due to the influx of a new group of immigrants from Eastern Europe, but reflects the influence of contemporary Protestants and the parallel religious revivals that other religions experienced at the time.

While Sama (1995), Hertzberg (1989) and Karp (1985) focus on different aspects of the Central European Jewish immigrant experience, all three historians would recognize that the immigrants developed synagogues tailored to fit into American society, they established schools with that same goal. Most were committed to supporting public schools where Jews and non-Jews studied together (Grinstein, 1969; Schultz 1982).<sup>28</sup> But parents also recognized the need for Jewish schools where children could learn about Judaism in an organized manner. Thus, individual congregations sponsored schools to supplement public ones and developed their own curricula (Zeldin, 1983). The autonomous character of each congregational school became the dominant pattern for Jews of Central European descent. As a result, schools' educational aims and purposes varied.

These congregational supplementary schools met either on a weekday afternoon or a weekend morning. The main subjects of study were Bible, history, Jewish religion, and Jewish ethics (Katzoff, 1949; Zeldin, 1983). The teaching of Hebrew was given either a secondary position or disregarded entirely because prayer was offered in English. That being the case, teaching Hebrew and Hebrew prayers became largely peripheral, if not irrelevant.

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<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that the supplementary school system evolved in the United States only because the vast majority of Jewish children now were able to receive their general education together with their non-Jewish neighbors in the American public school system. In addition to the supplementary school, some American Jews have always received their Jewish education at private day schools. In this setting, children studied both Jewish and secular subjects. In 1935, there were 16 day schools in all of the U.S., involving about 4600 students with only three high schools with a population of not more than a few hundred students. By 1965, there were said to be over 300 elementary and secondary day schools in which over 55,000 children were studying.

Grinstein (1969) describes the routine in a typical mid-1800s Sunday school. The school met in one room; the teacher sat on a raised platform. Children were seated on long benches, ten to a bench. The teacher opened the day with prayer, the children repeating the prayer after her, sentence by sentence. Then she read a chapter from the Bible followed by a series of questions and answers concerning theology, Jewish holidays, and Jewish religious practices. Questions included, "Who formed you, child, and made you live?" The school closed its session with a Hebrew hymn sung by the children. This image is striking in its similarity to much public schooling at the time, where teachers taught in one-room schoolhouses, and children of mixed ages responded in chorus.

Consider the portrait of U.S. schooling offered by Laura Ingalls Wilder in her account of nine-year-old Almanzo's experience in public school in 1866:

Mr. Corse rapped on his desk with his ruler; it was time for school to begin. All the boys and girls went to their seats. The girls sat on the left side of the room and boys sat on the right side, with the big stove and wood-box in the middle between them. The big ones sat in the back seats, the middle-sized ones in the middle seats, and the little ones in the front seats. All the seats were the same size. The big boys could hardly get their knees under their desks, and the little boys couldn't rest their feet on the floor. (Wilder, 1933, p. 6)

The one-room schoolhouse was a mainstay of public school education at the time. The teacher sat at the front, the students sat in rows, with the youngest children sitting up front, the older children in the back. In addition to oral exercises and catechisms, the teachers read stories intended to transmit important moral lessons. In sum, the development of the Jewish school in mid-nineteenth century America can be seen as being highly influenced by the public schools of the time, for the supplemental schools took on the structure and



norms of the larger American society and of Protestant Sunday schools (Zeldin, 1983).

Grinstein (1969) suggests in addition to the Sunday school, the Central European Jewish immigrants also sponsored some all day schools. These schools offered a Jewish curriculum that consisted of reading the prayer book, religion in the form of catechism, and biblical history. The English curriculum was usually extensive and sometimes competed with the best of the non-Jewish private schools.

Finally, some Jewish children received their Jewish education from private teachers. Grinstein (1969) explains that in some instances the private tutor taught at the synagogue and in other instances he taught in the homes of his pupils. "He limited himself to instruction in Hebrew, but it is doubtful whether he taught more than a mechanical reading knowledge of the prayer book" (p. 40).

### **The Second Wave 1881 - 1924: Eastern European Jews Preserve Cultural Inheritance**

A second major wave of Jewish immigration began in 1881 following the assassination of Czar Alexander II of Russia. The Russian government and people, seeking a scapegoat to blame for the economic depression of the times, targeted the Jews. This scapegoating became the rationale for pogroms and restrictive laws aimed at eliminating Jews from economic and civic life. As a result, between 1880 and 1920, another two million Jews immigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States (Hertzberg 1989; Karp, 1985).

One must exercise caution in attempting to generalize about the experiences of the two million people who arrived over a 40-year period. There was, no doubt,

considerable variation in the desires and dispositions of the individuals who participated in this second wave. Still, most scholars agree that the more observant of the Eastern European Jews preferred not to emigrate. It was a common assumption that a Jew could not easily be faithful to God or tradition in America (Hertzberg 1989; Karp, 1985).

Consider the observations of Shalom Aleichem, an important Jewish writer who came to the U.S. before World War I, and whose views on American Jewish life are reflected in his last major work, *Mottel Peise, the Cantor's Son* (Howe & Wisse, 1979). Mottel Peise, like many immigrants, came to the U.S. and immediately went in search of other immigrants from the same hometown in the old country. When he finds his "extended family" from Europe, he is perplexed. Those who were considered ignorant and socially unacceptable in Europe had become community leaders. Paradoxically, a learned man—a ritual slaughterer back home—had been reduced to helplessness and total poverty. Transplanted on American soil, the Jewish world was turned upside down. Several scholars agree that deeply observant Jews avoided the United States for this reason (Hertzberg 1989; Karp, 1985). Again, we cannot know for certain: we have very little concrete and direct evidence that sheds light on these aspects of Jewish immigration.

Many of those who did come, while not strictly observant, were nevertheless motivated to maintain some religious traditions and were committed to some form of Jewish education (Hertzberg, 1989; Schultz 1982). The compact Jewish neighborhoods in the larger cities constituted the cornerstone of the Eastern

European communal approach to Jewish education (Ben Horin, 1969; Hertzberg, 1952; Katzoff, 1949; Pilch, 1969):

The communal school was a product of Jewish life in America during the immigration period and immediately following its stoppage. In the environment of immigrants and first-generation American Jews, the Talmud Torah was a familiar and natural phenomenon in the general scheme of things. In the buildings of the larger units were housed many socio-cultural institutions and in some instances a synagogue. (Pilch, 1969, p. 128)

A walk through the East Side of New York, South Philadelphia, Chicago's West Side, Boston's North End, Rochester's Joseph Avenue section, Baltimore's Lombard Street and similar neighborhoods in other American cities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries would disclose the variety and vitality of the East European Jewish immigrant community. These neighborhoods recreated much of the rich culture of the immigrants' homelands, shtetl or metropolis. Newsstands offered newspapers and journals in both Hebrew and Yiddish.<sup>29</sup> In Baltimore, several blocks of Lombard Street were a market for dry goods and old clothes, but its specialties were prayer shawls and kosher foods.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Yiddish is the language spoken by many Jews who lived in Germany and Eastern Europe. It is based largely on German and Hebrew. As a rule, Jews only spoke Yiddish in societies where they did not have equal rights. The Jews of Poland and Russia, for example, spoke Yiddish, while the overwhelming majority of Jews in 19th century France and Germany spoke French and German. When Jews migrated to countries where they had equal rights, they usually only spoke Yiddish for the first generation.

<sup>30</sup> I draw images of the Jewish neighborhoods from the literature and films that came out of this period. Abraham Cahan lived in the Lower East Side and wrote a novel and many short stories describing the life of these Jewish immigrants. Similarly Mary Antin's (1969) autobiography is illuminating. Also the most famous contemporary account of the literature of the Lower East Side is Irving Howe's *World of our Fathers* (1976). Finally, the *Bintel Brief*, a collection of letters written to the *Forward*, a Yiddish newspaper published in New York during the first half of the 20th century, paints a vivid picture of immigrant Jewish life at this time. The letters described the life and times of the immigrants who were trying to find their way in a strange land. Finally, there are several movies depicting the early Jewish neighborhoods in the United States, including *Hester Street*, *Avalon*, *The Imported Bridegroom* and the original *Jazz Singer*.

Dozens of small synagogues sprinkled the neighborhoods. Leading congregations brought the star cantors of Europe to their pulpits.<sup>31</sup> Newly arrived immigrants, whether from Poland, Russia, or Lithuania, could find a synagogue with familiar liturgy and worship practices. In dozens of neighborhood schools, immigrants from all over Eastern Europe could find a school that reflected their communities' cultures and customs

Two very important cultural institutions of the Jewish neighborhoods were the Yiddish press and theater. In the 1920s, Yiddish newspapers published in New York sold over 200,000 copies daily (Telushkin, 1991). Both the Yiddish press and theater promoted Jewish culture and knowledge and became an essential part of the first Jewish-American generation.

Concentrated and crowded Jewish neighborhoods were filled with Jews, selling and buying, talking and arguing, all with their own connection to Judaism. *Landsmanshaftn*, societies of people from the same town or district, were formed for emotional and financial support, offering sickness and death benefits, life insurance, and help with weddings and other expenses. Jews living in these neighborhoods re-created much of the Jewish gestalt of their Eastern European communities. Looking after one another, they nurtured environments and lifestyles permeated by Jewish values and customs. Hence, in many ways, the Jewish neighborhoods were educational agents as well.

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<sup>31</sup> A cantor leads the congregation in prayer. Generally, a cantor has a pleasing voice.

Jacob A. Riis, famous for describing the debilitating effects of the Lower East Side, also described one very positive aspect of the Jewish neighborhood in *Children of the Poor*<sup>32</sup>:

It happened once that I came in on a Friday evening at the breaking of bread, just as the four candles on the table had been lit, with the Sabbath blessing upon the home and all it sheltered ... the patriarchal host who arose ... bade the guests welcome with a dignity a king might have envied. (Riis, 1892, p. 44)

Notice that guests in the home Riis is describing are invited by the family to share a traditional Friday night experience. Similarly, Mendele Mekher Sefarim beautifully describes Sabbath observance in the immigrant's home in many of his novels and short stories. For example, in *The Sabbath of the Poor* he writes:

Six days in the week Shmulik the rag-picker lives like a dog. But on the eve of the Sabbath all is changed in his house. The walls are whitewashed, the house is cleaned; a new cloth shines on the table, and the rich and yellow bread, a joy to the eyes, rests thereon. The candles burn in their copper candlesticks, burnished for the Sabbath; and a smell of good food goes out of the oven, where the dishes are covered. The little girls, with bare feet, have come back from the bath; their hair is coiled in tresses; they linger in the corners of the room; by their faces it may be seen that they are waiting, joyous hearted, for those whom they love.

"*Gut Shabbos*" says Shmulik, as he enters; and he looks with love on his wife and his children, and his face beams. "*Gut Shabbos*" says Moishale, his son, loudly, as he too enters hurriedly, like one who is full of good tidings, and eager to spread them. And to and fro in the house the father and the son go, singing, with pleasant voices, the *Shalom Aleichem* songs that greet the invisible angels that come into every Jewish house when the father returns from the house of prayer on the eve of the Sabbath.

The rag-picker is no longer a dog; today he has a new soul. It is *Shabbos*, and Shmulik is the son of a king. He says the *Kiddush*

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<sup>32</sup> The Jewish Sabbath is observed from Friday sundown through Saturday sunset. The Sabbath is intended to allow individuals to set aside one day a week for spiritual and physical rest, study, prayer, song, and renewal. In the home, meals are especially prepared, with wine and a special Sabbath bread known as challah. In addition, candles are kindled to mark the Sabbath's onset.

over the wine, and he sits down at the table. His wife is on his right, and his children are around them. (Sefarim cited in Lieberman & Beringause, 1987, p. 300)

Clearly, certain aspects of traditional Judaism remained an important value for Jews living in the Lower East Side. *Shabbat* dinners, holiday observance and keeping kosher co-existed with a strong desire to enroll children in the public schools, which were considered to be the great democratic institution, the bridge to a new society, and the key to self-improvement (Ben-Horin, 1969; Hertzberg, 1989; Karp, 1985).

### **Central and Eastern European Immigrants: Assimilation Challenges Tradition**

Similar to the Jews who came in the first wave of immigration from Central Europe, the Jews who left Eastern Europe in the middle of the 19th century were the poorest and the least educated (Hertzberg, 1989; Karp 1985). While some of the Jews who came from Central Europe were perhaps willing to abandon their religious and cultural distinctiveness, many of these Eastern European Jews still considered religious practices to be somewhat important and worth transmitting to the next generation. For example, Abraham Cahan, editor of *the Jewish Daily Forward* and a leading voice of Jewish socialist secularism, recounted that the majority of Jewish workers whom the labor unions were trying to organize observed the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. Hertzberg (1989) describes their ambivalence:

In the struggle to make a living, tens of thousands of these conventionally pious workers and petty bourgeois from Eastern Europe did work on the Sabbath, but they did so reluctantly and with pain. Those who were joyfully abandoning the older ways in the name of socialism or anarchism were a minority. In the

immigrant days, most of the homes on the Lower East Side continued to keep kosher. (pp. 159-160)

At least two historians (Hertzberg, 1989; Karp, 1985) argue that the Central European Jewish immigrants willingly and wholeheartedly embraced American culture and accommodated their Jewish practices to order to fit in. In contrast, they claim that the Eastern European Jewish immigrants wanted to adapt themselves to American life, while maintaining their ethnic and cultural inheritance (Hertzberg, 1989; Karp, 1985; Sachar, 1954). Like their Central European Jewish peers, the Eastern European immigrants were committed to the secular public school and to the establishment of their own supplementary religious schools. But the supplemental schools developed by this second wave of immigration were markedly different from those of the Central European Jews in two significant ways: organization and curriculum.

While the Central European Jews organized congregational supplementary schools (most of which met on Sunday morning), the Eastern European Jews believed the synagogue was a place of worship, separate from a communally-sponsored school which would educate children. Over time, they developed a community school system known as the Talmud Torah (Katzoff, 1949).<sup>33</sup> The assumption was that children would receive their Jewish education at the Talmud Torah in the afternoons, after they were dismissed from their public schools. This Jewish school system was modeled on the public schools, requiring orderly

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<sup>33</sup> In Eastern Europe, the Talmud Torah was established to make provision for the education of orphans or children of the poor. Originally, the Talmud Torah was transported to the United States for the same purpose. However, by 1910 educators like Dr. Samson Benderly insisted that the Talmud Torah must cease to be a school for the children of the poor and become a

classrooms and a more formalized curriculum (Aron, 1995) than was the case with the more autonomous congregational schools of the Central European Jewish immigrants.

### **Central and Eastern European Immigrants Create Their Own Supplemental School**

Like the Talmud Torah schools of Eastern Europe, the early Talmud Torah schools in the U.S. were attended mostly by children of the poor who, in many instances, had to be given shoes, clothing, and food (Ben-Horin, 1969). The schools were funded by those members of the community who were more secure financially. Early descriptions of these schools paint a rather dreary picture:

Their daily two-session instruction from 4 to 8 p.m. and Sundays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., the Talmud Torahs offered in quarters which did not permit standards of cleanliness, ventilation, and light to be high. The equipment was very poor, and so was the teaching. Frequent relocations of families in search of a livelihood caused attendance to be highly irregular. The lower grades were overcrowded, the upper grades meagerly attended. (Ben-Horin, 1969 p. 68)

Learning also seems mechanical and dry. Katzoff (1949) writes:

The ability to join in the Hebrew service was indispensable in the life of the Jew, and proficiency in the use of the *Siddur* was the prerequisite for such participation. Since prayer, both private and communal, were the norm of Jewish life, knowledge of the *Siddur* was augmented through actual life situation. This know-how was generally limited to the facility of mechanical reading and of following the order of the service. However, the *Siddur* was not used as a textbook for imparting ideas about Jewish life. (Katzoff, 1949, p. 76)

Ben-Horin (1969) described the situation in a similar manner:

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community institution for all children. He argued that a system of education which separates facilities for rich and poor children was both un-American and un-Jewish.



Pupils study only prayer reading, without understanding of the Hebrew text. ... Those who head these schools call this religious education and thus discharge their obligation without realizing that from such schools can emerge only ignoramuses and that instead of endearing Judaism to the students they implant in them a hatred for it. (p. 62)

After Dr. Samson Benderly became the first director of the New York Bureau of Jewish Education, the structure and content of the Talmud Torah changed dramatically. Benderly devoted his professional efforts with the Bureau to strengthening school system infrastructure and curriculum. For example, under his tenure at the Bureau a salary scale for teachers was developed, and a Board of License to examine teacher candidates and issue certification was established. In addition, the Bureau conducted courses in English, Jewish history, history of education, educational methodology, and classroom management. Under Benderly, the Bureau borrowed \$10,000 and created a Textbook Fund for the preparation and printing of textbooks and guides for teachers. To standardize courses of study, the Bureau created a General Board of Talmud Torahs and Hebrew Principals' Association, reflecting new emphasis on curriculum. One of the purposes of this Association was to enable principals to standardize curricula. The new curricula reflected a commitment to the Zionist movement and the Hebraic Renaissance.<sup>34</sup> It promoted identification with all the Jewish people, as reflected in its aims:

To induct the child into the institutional life of the Jewish community, including but not only the synagogue, and to lead him

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<sup>34</sup> Today it is taken for granted that Hebrew is a modern language. However, a little over a century ago, Hebrew was not a spoken language. Jews prayed in Hebrew and often studied Hebrew texts but nobody conversed in Hebrew. Hebrew was like Latin until Eliezer Ben-Yehuda resurrected it by creating new words and using old Hebrew words in new ways. Ben Yehuda also started a dictionary for the new language.

to recognize his responsibility as a Jew, the definition of the term denoting belonging to a people. (Pilch, 1969, p. 129)

Talmud Torahs recognized that students not only needed to know how to read the prayer book; they needed to learn Hebrew as a modern living language.

Katzoff (1949) explains:

This negative attitude toward the *Siddur* was influenced moreover by the nationalistic ideology inherent in the rising secular Hebraic culture of the time. The *Siddur*, oriented upon religious frame of thought, was looked upon with condescension, and was considered a drag upon the curriculum. Knowledge of Hebrew language was felt to be extremely important, but a meaningless mechanical reading of the *Siddur* was regarded as worthless. (p. 77)

Under Benderly's influence, students were taught to identify with Jews worldwide and to become comfortable with some Hebrew. The communal educational system focused on Jewish nationalism, with Hebrew as a central curricular component. The main purpose of Jewish education was to preserve the Jewish people as a distinct group. The central ingredients of a good Jewish education included:

sufficient knowledge of Hebrew, which should enable the children to understand the [prayer book, Bible, and other texts], ... Jewish history, ancient and modern, and an acquaintance with religious observance. (Friedland cited in Aron, 1995, p. 59)

While the history of the Jewish people and the Hebrew language were considered essential, students were only expected to be acquainted with religious practices. Rather than focus on practice, the Talmud Torah aimed to foster close relationships to the entire Jewish people through the study of history and literature. Curriculum was geared to an appreciation of the totality of the Jewish cultural heritage, including religion and modern Hebrew literature.

Describing the growth of the Talmud Torah schools, Aron (1995) writes:

Firsthand accounts from the period have a breathless quality, as though a cadre of *wunderkinds* had swooped down and waved a set of magic wands. Within a decade communal Talmud Torahs modeled after those in New York existed in most major cities. (p. 58)

Structural differences—stemming from the curricular differences—also distinguished Central European Jews' Sunday school from Eastern European Jews' Talmud Torah. Because students who attended the Talmud Torah were expected to be fluent in Hebrew language, the Talmud Torah held classes four afternoons a week after school and also on Sunday for three or four hours per day. In contrast, the Central European Sunday schools—where Hebrew was not taught—met only once a week for a couple of hours.

### **Congregational Schools: Providing a Jewish Milieu Outside the Home**

By the early 1900s, the Central European immigrants became identified with the Reform movement and the Eastern European immigrants with Conservative Judaism. Before discussing how prayer was taught in these different supplementary schools, we need to consider a decisive development in the American Jewish educational scene: the shift in the Eastern European community from the community-sponsored Talmud Torah to the congregational school. While the Central European Jews relied upon individual congregations to support their own supplementary school, the Eastern European Jews organized their schools communally. The schools were not a part of their synagogues; they were neighborhood institutions. Only later—when Eastern European Jews began their move to suburbia—did they begin to organize their schools through synagogues.

Talmud Torah schools were extremely successful and could be found in most major cities but were not embraced by all American Jews. The focus on peoplehood was extremely problematic for the Reform Jews, who no longer viewed Hebrew as the Jewish people's sacred language, and who were not committed to a return to a Jewish homeland. Having already abandoned the teaching of Hebrew, they did not send their children to the Talmud Torah but rather to Sunday schools (Schultz, 1982).

The heavily concentrated Jewish neighborhoods described earlier began to shrink as early as the 1920s, when financially successful immigrants began migrating to second settlements, adjacent to more spacious neighborhoods, and finally to the suburbs (Blumenfield, 1949; Sklare, 1955). "In suburbia or in the new sections of the large cities, the new synagogue became the religio-cultural center for large segments of the Jewish population" (Pilch, 1969, p. 128).

Whereas the Eastern European immigrants could count on the culture of the streets to share in the transmission of Jewish traditions and to support a communally sponsored Talmud Torah, this was impossible in the suburbs where the streets were not so crowded, and where there were fewer kosher markets, no merchants, no Hebrew or Yiddish spoken on the corner, no Yiddish theater. In the new neighborhoods, Jews replaced the community and culture of the old neighborhood with the synagogue (Aron, 1995; Pilch, 1969; Sklar, 1955). The desire to raise children in a Jewish milieu motivated many parents to join synagogues:

The quest for Jewish surroundings for the children, the socio-psychological need for belonging to one's own group, enhanced by

a vague kind of Jewish consciousness, on the one hand, and the threat of anti-Semitism on the other (the shock received from the enormity of the Nazi Holocaust), and the general conditions of life in suburbia where each individual had to be identified as a member of some group—all of these were major causes of the rapid growth of the new American synagogue. Temples and synagogues provided facilities for the entire family: clubs for the men, sisterhoods for the women, clubs for the young adults and adolescents, and religious schools for the children. (Pilch, 1969, p. 124)

The synagogue became the central focus for Jewish life in suburbia. Parents expected the synagogue, specifically the synagogue's supplementary school, to provide a Jewish milieu for their children. A close look at enrollment in congregational supplementary schools supports this claim.

Enrollment in congregational schools in the New York area increased 150% in the years between 1917 and 1927 (Ben-Horin, 1969, p. 83). In 1928, only 23.6% of students in U.S. Jewish schools were enrolled in a congregational school; by 1948 the percentage had grown to 82.7% (Pilch, 1969, p. 123). The trend from the community-sponsored Talmud Torah to the synagogue-based supplementary school had become the norm. Eisenstein (1982) suggests several reasons why individual congregations were willing to take on the burden of Jewish education:

First, ... families joined the synagogue mainly for the education of their children; to be more accurate, for the preparation of their children for bar mitzvah (and later bat mitzvah). ... Second, the Rabbis and lay leaders hoped that by keeping the children within their jurisdiction they would develop in the growing generation a loyalty which would carry over into their adult years ... Third, congregations ... represent a particular philosophy of Judaism, which they are obligated to convey to the next generation. (p. 9)

Thus, as the milieu changed, so did the demands and expectations placed on schools. As schools became associated with synagogues, their goals became

intertwined with the needs, values, and goals of the supporting synagogue and its denominational affiliation.

On the one hand, this shift was advantageous: children began to acquire their Jewish education in the synagogue, bridging any gap that may have existed between the Jewish school and the synagogue. But the shift was somewhat problematic (Blumenfield 1949; Eisenstein 1982). With the rise of the congregational school, many more schools were created. Classes were sometimes too small, and it became more difficult to find competent and professional teachers and educational leaders. The Depression further weakened the Jewish school. Indeed, the individual congregations fared worse than the Talmud Torah schools because their financial situation was vulnerable to economic crisis. When individual congregations were under serious financial pressures, the school was the first to be affected with severe budget cuts. By assuming responsibility for schools, the congregations undertook the virtually impossible task of supporting a private school, which rarely pays for itself (Eisenstein, 1982).

Another disadvantage under this new arrangement was that synagogues were competing with one another, both for adult membership and for students (Blumenfield, 1949; Eisenstein, 1982; Pilch, 1969). Concerns for survival competed with concerns for tradition, as schools and synagogues were forced to modernize their language and practices in order to attract members:

In order to gain popular support for the school, synagogue authorities conveyed to the public the goals of Jewish education in a language consistent with new practices and with the emerging pattern of American Jewish life, which tended to resist the laborious

task of becoming rooted in Jewish culture. The idea that religious affiliation alone can enrich Jewish life became a weapon that affected action. The school designed its program to fit the new age. (Pilch, 1969, p. 125)

According to Aron (1995), parents of that generation (1920s and 1930s) were somewhat indifferent to formal education. However, parents were keenly interested in Bar Mitzvah preparation. Thus, the synagogue supplementary schools—responding to the market—became a means to becoming Bar Mitzvah. "By banding together and changing their rhetoric, the educators of that era were able to capitalize on this interest and double the enrollments in Jewish schools" (p. 61).

By the late 1930s, it became customary for synagogue supplementary schools to require boys wishing to become Bar Mitzvah to complete a minimum number of years of supplementary education. Schoenfeld (1988) explained that the Bar Mitzvah was critical to the Jewish folk religion. While the Jewish educators and rabbis (Schoenfeld calls them the elite) did not view the Bar Mitzvah as the goal of Jewish education, they seized the opportunity to assure that formal education would remain essential by connecting preparation to become Bar Mitzvah with formal Jewish education. Congregational supplementary schools would provide students with the necessary skills to become Bar Mitzvah.

Thus, by end of World War II, we observe that the Talmud Torah's original focus on the Zionist movement and the Hebrew language shifted in the congregational supplementary school to Bar Mitzvah preparation. Katzoff (1949) explains:

The aim of such teaching is to develop the facility of reading and writing Hebrew mechanically, so that the child might be enabled to read the prayer book—again mechanically—to follow the religious service or participate in it. ... When the mechanics of reading are acquired, the pupil goes on to the reading of the *Siddur* (the prayer book) or to some preliminary text containing selected prayers. ... The purposes of this new phase are to familiarize the pupil with the important selections of the *Siddur* and to increase fluency in mechanical reading. Practice for fluency continues through the years of attendance, with a gradual tapering off of the time allotted to it. Familiarity with the geography of the *Siddur* as well as some understanding of its religious concepts takes on increasing importance in the later years of schooling. (p. 45)

While this new arrangement assured the future of formal Jewish education, it also obscured the goals of the school (Aron, 1995). The new congregational supplementary schools all shared the desire to provide students with a Jewish environment that they did not encounter in public school, in their new neighborhoods, or increasingly in their homes (Katzoff, 1949; Rappoport, 1936). Indeed, the shift in Jewish homes had serious implications for the content of the supplementary school curriculum.

### **Waning Jewish Practice in the Home**

The profound effect that waning observances had on Jewish education seems predictable in light of assumptions made by Jews through the ages about the home as an educative agent. The Bible demands that parents teach their children as it states:

And be it that these laws which I command unto you today, you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them, as you sit in your home and as you walk on your way outside, when you lie down and when you awaken. (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

The ideas found in these verses appear throughout the Bible. Both parents were responsible for educating their children. The Book of Proverbs reiterates



this point: "Listen, my son to the ethics of your father, and do not forsake the Torah of your mother" (Proverbs 1:8). In general, it was assumed that parents are each responsible for teaching those commandments that they are personally obligated to fulfill (Matzner-Bekerman, 1984). Children were expected to learn to observe the commandments and study Jewish texts and history. The ultimate goal of education was to teach children to love and revere God (Matzner-Bekerman, 1984). Modern circumstances in which some homes no longer contribute to a child's Jewish education represents a major break from Jewish history—one that has had a profound impact on the Jewish school (Pilch, 1969).

Much of the literature from the first half of the 20th century bemoans the decline of religiously observant homes (Arzt 1949; Davis, 1937; Heschel, 1954; Kaplan 1956):

The very home which identified itself with the synagogue no longer fulfilled its historic functions qua Jewish home. While through the centuries the home was the matrix of many religio-cultural interests—folklore, reading, religious music, observances and ceremonials, biblical and *midrashic* stories—these were no longer cultivated in the average American Jewish home. The home, acculturated to the mores of the American majority groups, no longer perpetuated Jewish traditions ... The child did not have opportunities to experience Jewish life in the home as a matter of course. (Pilch, 1969, p. 125)

Arzt (1949) explicitly writes: "I am not at all oblivious to the fact that religious observance in the home is on the wane, that attendance at synagogue service (except on High Holy Days) is far from satisfactory."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> I should note here that while I believe these claims, they are not based on careful research on home practices, but rather on agreed upon assumptions in the Jewish community. Ethnographies or larger scale surveys of practices in Jewish homes might help complexify these – probably – overly simplified assumptions about what happens in many American Jewish homes.

Democracy in America came with no roadmap for preserving Judaism. Nor could any of the immigrant groups anticipate the challenges confronted by the new American Jews who understandably needed and wanted to assimilate into their new home, while maintaining their Jewish traditions and identities. Yet the challenges were immense, and various solutions – Sunday school, synagogues, Talmud Torah – all came with costs and benefits, the extent and depth of which could not be understood ahead of time.

In their zeal to create American homes, for example, some Jews were eager to banish Jewish ritual objects, such as the kiddush cup or the menorah, to a closet or hidden corner of the house. Joselit notes:

A 1931 survey of the contents of Jewish homes in over ten cities (including New York, Cleveland, and Los Angeles) revealed that, with the exception of a menorah and a pair of candlesticks, manifestations of Jewishness were rarely visible. Fewer than 20 percent of those surveyed owned a *kiddush* cup, while only 40 percent posted a *mezuzah* on their front door. In other instances, Jewish ritual objects were dismissed as curiosities. Old-fashioned or poorly designed, Jewish markers clashed harshly with the conventions of modern home décor and the cultural aspirations of its residents. The son of upwardly mobile parents recalls that a gilt-framed picture of his *Zayda* (grandfather) hung prominently in their home for many years until the family concluded that it didn't look nice with the new furniture, and so *Zayda* was relegated to the bedroom. A Van Gogh print was put in his place. (Joselit, 1994, p. 148)

The marginalization of Judaism in the home—a trend which accelerated in America—had its roots in the latter part of the 18th century, as the Enlightenment and Emancipation drew Jews into ever-increasing contact with non-Jews, with profound effect on Jewish cultural and home life.

Another indication that Jewish religious values became increasingly more marginalized is that immigrants sought Jewish fellowship outside the synagogue

by creating lodges, clubs, and benevolent societies intended to strengthen Jewish communal life. These clubs or organizations reflect the growing secularization and acculturation of American Jews. B'nai Brith is a good example of the new way in which Jews were organizing themselves. Founded in 1843, B'nai Brith introduced the idea of Jewishness as an ethnic entity as opposed to a religious one. Ultimately, these new institutions allowed Jews to seek out the company of other Jews outside of the synagogue. They also fit comfortably in the larger American trend of such social clubs.

At first, providing a sound Jewish education for their children was not the highest priority for many immigrant Jewish parents who were, of necessity, more concerned with the problems of physical survival, finding jobs, feeding and clothing their children, and overcoming anti-Semitism. Having addressed these basic issues, immigrants focused on assimilation. Why so arduously? Perhaps because they realized that, for the first time in generations, prosperity and acceptance was within their reach, even if meant relinquishing certain rituals, prayers, and observances. But hindsight skews our vision, for we can see clearly how these traditions and rituals began to disappear. We do not know to what extent this trend was clear to the immigrants, as they lived in the moment.

We do know that some educational leaders recognized these trends and wanted to insure that religious practices were not ignored. Soon, supplementary schools began taking on the responsibility of transmitting Judaism to the next generation.

Today, rabbis urge their congregants to set aside Friday to worship in the temple, but I am certain that all of us recognize that at one

time Jews did not need to come to synagogue. ... [their] homes were filled [with Jewish traditions and practices]. (Weissberg, 1959, p. 15)

As we have already seen, however, the problem was not simply one of changes in Jewish home life. Homes cannot be wrenched from their cultural contexts and, while previous generations of Jewish families created and lived within particular kinds of homes, they did so –in large part – because they lived within certain kinds of communities. Rappoport, (1936), Supervisor of the Board of Jewish Education in Chicago, wrote about the challenge of developing a curriculum for the Jewish schools in the United States: "A sense of Jewish kinship will not develop in the Jewish child itself as was the case in former generations. Today it must be actively fostered and nurtured by the Jewish school" (p. 144).

Rappoport argued that the Jewish school needed to create Jewish experiences for its students. These experiences were intended to cultivate a strong attachment to Judaism. The implication of Rappoport's directive was that Jewish homes were not practicing Judaism and were thus not providing children with many experiences essential to the development of a Jewish identity. For example, parents were unsure of how to make a Passover seder. They were uncertain about aspects of the tradition, and did not know many of the ritual prayers. As a result, it became customary for schools to sponsor model seders.

Therein does the life of the Jewish child in America differ from that of his forbear in the European community. Whereas the latter, as a child lived and functioned normally in a distinctly Jewish milieu, so that his school subjects may have had definite relevancy to his experiential background, the former has normally hardly anything of a Jewish background against which subject-matter might possibly

be interpreted. The first task then is to create experiential apperception among our children. (p. 143)

The literature of the time reiterates this sentiment. American Jewish neighborhoods and homes were no longer the primary place for children to receive their Jewish education. Schools would need to fill the void.

Among the practices disappearing in the home was prayer. American Jews were fast becoming both unknowledgeable and uncomfortable with traditional Jewish prayer. Heschel (1954), a philosopher trying to understand American Jewry, claimed that a major problem with American Jewry was that Jews were not comfortable praying. Addressing the spiritual lives of American Jews, Heschel argued that, while American Jews could be found in the pews, he did not believe they were spiritually present. He used as evidence for this claim his belief that the intonation of their recitations reflected a lack of spiritual engagement:

They recite the prayer book as if it were last week's newspaper. They utter shells of syllables, but put nothing of themselves into the shells. [They say,] Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all Thy heart—in lofty detachment, in complete anonymity as if giving an impartial opinion about an irrelevant question. ... In our daily speech, our words have a tonal quality. There is no communication without intonation. ... It is the intonation that lends grace to what we say. But when we pray the words faint on our lips. Our words have no tone, no strength, no personal dimension—as if reading paragraphs in Roget's Thesaurus. (pp. 50-51)

Howard Bruce Zyskind (1966), a Jewish educator, was also despondent about the art of praying. The Jews of earlier generations were able to praise God with their entire being, Zyskind claimed. He feared that modern Jews were unable to see God's glory in their lives:

The reverent beauty of the Psalms bespeaks a tragic truth of our modern age, for our world becomes increasingly incapable and unwilling to sing unto the Lord. Our world is a secular one, our

minds are bent upon science and technology, our orientation is one of independence and self-reliance—our prayers faint and fade into abuse or rote repetition. We no longer extol Thee, O God and King, neither do we bless Thy name for ever and ever. Every day we fail to bless Thee, and we have forgotten to praise Thy name for ever and ever.

Of course, there are those few who stand out as exceptions, but certainly the great majority in our movement is writing such an epitaph for this generation. And in time, the children of today will perpetuate our dilemma so that mankind ceases to pray, having lost the art of praying. (p. 24)

Zyskind and Heschel were concerned that American Jews were losing the ability to pray. While we sometimes have a tendency to wistfully wish for the good old days, their concerns are important ones to consider nonetheless. Both scholars worried that American Jews were no longer spiritually present. They feared that God was becoming irrelevant to modern American Jews. Or, that they were losing the ability to believe in God.

Dorff (1992) claims that prayer is "inextricably bound to belief in God. To whom, after all, does one pray if not to God?" (p. 150). If prayer commits one to belief in God, it is easy to understand why American Jewish leaders would be concerned that a new generation of Jews was no longer comfortable believing and, hence, no longer comfortable praying.

Once an intrinsic part of Jewish life, today prayer has lost its currency. Many homes are prayerless. In many there is no *Ha-Motzi*<sup>36</sup> before the meals, how much the more so no *Modeh-Ani*<sup>37</sup> or *Kriat Shema*.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, we also recognize the need not only to

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<sup>36</sup> *HaMotzi* is the blessing recited before eating bread.

<sup>37</sup> *Modeh Ani* is a prayer traditionally recited upon waking up in the morning. It is usually recited before getting out of bed, and it expresses thanks to God for another day of life.

<sup>38</sup> *Kriat Shema* literally means the reading of the *Shema*. Traditionally the *Shema* is recited in bed before going to sleep.

teach our children what to pray but also when to pray and how to pray. (Weissberg, 1959, p. 15)

### **Curricular Responses to Waning Home Practices and Declining School Hours**

We must, of course, be cautious about making sweeping generalizations about generations of Jews, in part, because these concerns were as much based on personal opinion and experience and not on systematic study of change. However, it does appear that there was a growing concern among a critical mass of Jewish leaders and educators that many American Jews were no longer able to pray. This led some communal leaders and educators to look to schools to for solutions, with even greater pressure for changes in the supplementary school curriculum, and the prayer curriculum was the focus of much discussion. Many practitioners writing about their curricular goals concerned themselves with preparing children for participation in public worship. Let us begin by considering how most practitioners thought about the prayer curriculum, before turning to an exceptional case, that of Rabbi Simon Greenberg. Rabbi Max Arzt (1949), a highly regarded Conservative Jewish educator, believed that the congregational school curriculum should focus on the necessary skills for Jewish living. He held this to be true because Jewish homes were no longer able to provide children with the minimum skills needed to observe Judaism in the home or participate in synagogue services. Arzt argued that if congregational schools did not teach skills, all other educational endeavors would be for naught:

Courses in the theology of the prayer book and in the origin and poetic appeal of the *Mitzvot Ma'asiyot* [commandments that require an action] are supremely important. But one might as well endeavor to teach swimming through a correspondence course. There is no

substitute for the process of learning through doing. (Arzt, 1949, p. 5)

Arzt was certain that children were not acquiring the skills of Jewish living at home. So he vigorously argued that the schools needed to be creating opportunities for children to be learning Judaism by doing Judaism. Arzt was in favor of classes that taught students how to recite prayers and how to participate in both private and public rituals.

Like Arzt, Freehof (1946), a prominent Reform pulpit rabbi, worried that American Jews were not learning to pray at home. Schools needed to teach them to how to pray:

If the habit of regular prayer were maintained in the average home it might be possible to say that the family altar is as sacred as the altar in the sanctuary. But ... home worship has, to an appalling extent, faded away ... Should not ... public worship now be made the chief content of religious instruction? (p. 231)

Concerned that prayer was no longer an organic part of the American Jewish home, Freehof argued that schools should shoulder the responsibility of teaching children how to pray. Freehof did not concern himself with individual or private prayer, nor did he focus on helping students understand the meaning of the liturgy. Rather, he argued that students needed to know how to participate in the public worship. In particular, he wanted to ensure that the students attending the supplementary school in his congregation acquire the skills necessary to allow them to participate in the public aspects of synagogue life.

As Kaplan (1956), director of the Bureau of Jewish Education in Baltimore, explained: "The generally accepted aims for teaching *Siddur* place the emphasis on the communal aspects of Jewish prayers, to enable the child to participate in



synagogue services" (p. 3). Educators were concerned with skills acquisition and reading fluency. The meaning of the prayers seems to be irrelevant. Studying the afternoon Hebrew schools in the Los Angeles area, Leibman (1949-50) found that, while students were expected to learn how to read prayers fluently, they were not expected to learn the underlying values of the prayers. The focus of the school curriculum was on participation in public worship. Hence, reading Hebrew fluently was considered critical, while understanding core concepts was less important. Feinstein (1951) was a practitioner who echoed Leibman's concerns:

For the past three years we have been developing in our school a method of teaching to read fluently the prayers in the *Siddur*. Our aim was *reading ability*, even if accompanied by very little comprehension. (p. 47)

Schwartz (1951) concurred: "In many of our congregations, the primary motivation for the Junior Congregation has been the teaching of synagogue skills as part of the preparation for Bat Mitzvah" (p. 3). Katzoff (1949) conducted a study of Conservative afternoon schools and determined that "it is evident from the replies that the cardinal aim of *Siddur* instruction is the preparation for participation in synagogue services and religious home ceremonies" (p. 78). He also claimed:

Another result of the spiritual impoverishment in the home is the shift of emphasis from private observance to collective religious expression. ... the synagogue has become the solitary bulwark of Judaism. If the schools do not stress periodic prayer at home, they do center much of their attention upon public worship in the synagogue. One of the unique contributions of the Conservative synagogues to American Jewish life has been the introduction of weekly children's Sabbath services. (p. 110)

Thus, among these practitioners there appeared to be a general agreement that the purpose of the teaching of prayer was to prepare students to participate

in public worship and in certain home ceremonies. Educators regularly argued that their prayer curriculum is a Hebrew reading curriculum, suggesting that the only really important part of the curriculum is learning to read Hebrew.

In addition to the waning practices of the home, there may also have been an historical component to this emphasis on mechanical Hebrew reading. Ben-Horin (1969) and Katzoff (1949) note that, in Europe, the child learned to read using a prayer book. Hebrew reading proficiency was the purpose of certain European Jewish schools as it enabled full participation in communal religious life. As a result, the congregational supplementary schools were returning to the way schools taught Hebrew historically. The school used the prayer book as a text for developing reading skills, rather than as a textbook for imparting ideas about Jewish thought or theology.

Rabbi Simon Greenberg provides one notable exception to the focus on Hebrew reading skills and preparation for participation in public worship. Greenberg (1938), one of the leading luminaries of the Conservative movement, offers an unusual vision of what the prayer curriculum should look like. He argued that the curriculum must address itself to all Jews, whether or not they attend synagogue regularly. The purpose of the curriculum was to enable the learner to develop a personal relationship with the prayer book. Greenberg suggested that the goals of the prayer curriculum should be to mold the character and strengthen the individual Jew's inner self. In addition, the curriculum should develop and deepen the individual's relationship with God.

For Greenberg (1938), the goal was for prayer to be one of the basic habits of his students. He recognized that public worship was not for everyone. Some Jews might prefer (or need) to pray at home, rather than in the synagogue. Greenberg argued that a Jew must be able to make the prayer book a "personal companion...the book he should take with him no matter where he goes" (p. 32). Notice that, unlike other practitioners of his time, Greenberg did not claim that the purpose of the prayer curriculum was to learn how to participate in public worship. Rather, he argued that the purpose of the prayer curriculum was to develop "personal character and Jewish loyalty" (p. 32).

One cannot help but wonder why most educators focused exclusively on fluent Hebrew reading skills. One possibility is that the schools were catering to parents who judged the supplementary school by how well their child could participate in synagogue services, a critical skill for becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah, a life-cycle event which was fast becoming a very important part of American Jewish life. Greenberg (1938) explains:

The whole approach seems to be determined by the desire to train the child how to participate properly in a communal ritual exercise [prayer], primarily because the parents of the children judge the effectiveness of the school by the ability of the children to participate in the communal exercise. (p. 34)

Given the competition among synagogues (in large part due to the economic strains placed on schools), it is easy to understand the appeal of preparing students for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah. This was a clear and demonstrable product of Jewish education, much easier to see and judge than one's spirituality or identity.

In addition to these rather practical reasons, Jacob Neusner (1987) offers a thoughtful analysis of the popular Bar Mitzvah:

Where in olden times it was not particularly important, today it is a magnificent occasion, celebrated with vigor and enthusiasm by Jews who otherwise do not often find their way to the synagogue on Sabbath mornings, by Jews married to gentiles, by Jews themselves not "barmitzvahed" (as they say), by Jews remote from any and all connection with Jewish organizations, institutions, activities, observances. (p. 145)

Neusner points out that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah calls for dinners, dances, and lavish expenditures and that many Jews find the occasion to be intensely meaningful and profoundly important. Wondering why that is, Neusner claims that all Jews have a deep desire, perhaps an even primal drive to transmit their Judaism to the next generation. He attributes this to the impact of the Holocaust on the psyche of the Jewish people. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah became a symbol of continuity and strength of the chain of tradition. Jews in America, he writes, have no past, since the Jews murdered in Europe included most of the families of Jews now alive in the West:

Jews in America, these Jews without a past and without a well-planned future, fear that the Jews are dying out, and do not want that to happen. They do not want to be the last Jews on earth – and that fear, and the hope it represents, comes to full and complete statement in the bar or the bat mitzvah. Then we know that we, the parents, are not the last Jews on earth. (p. 145)

Another way to understand the significance of Bar/Bat Mitzvah is to consider Jonathan Woocher's (1986) analysis of the American Jewish community. Woocher introduces the term "civil religion" to describe American Jews of the sixties, seventies and eighties. Woocher defines "civil religion" on some of the following assumptions: (1) one can be a good American and a good Jew; (2) while theology is somewhat irrelevant, ensuring Jewish survival is central; (3)

Jewish rituals are valuable but the individuals are free to observe them as they chose.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah offered the perfect vehicle for "civil religion". It allows a child to demonstrate his/her skills to the Jewish community, offering concrete evidence that the parents have transmitted at least some facet of Jewish identity to their child. And, by including family speeches and personalized rituals (such as candle lighting and passing of the Torah), it provides an opportunity for individuals to freely express religious or moral sentiments. All topped off by an American-style party, the event offers an attractive bridge between the traditional past and the new hybrid of a sacred and secular present.

Ultimately, as Neusner and Woocher's analysis suggests, we may regard the Bar/Bat Mitzvah phenomenon as a symptom and outgrowth of the challenges of Jewish education in the 20th century: (1) many Jewish homes were contributing less to Jewish education; (2) there were fewer hours of school; and (3) curricula were designed to enable students to participate in public worship without consistent attention to spiritual or even literal meaning. The curricula examined in the next chapter illustrate these challenges as reflected in the teaching of prayer in liberal supplementary schools and the impact of how Jewish prayer has thus been taught for the past 30 years on the vast majority of Jews in America today.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **ANALYSIS OF CURRICULAR MATERIALS**

Nearly everyone, at some point in his life, speaks to God. We give thanks. We ask why. We request help. If praying is so natural, why is teaching prayer so challenging? We have addressed this question from a historical perspective. An alternative approach entails considering curricular materials that were designed to help teachers confront this struggle.

Analysis of these materials requires understanding two factors that have strongly influenced curriculum writing and the teaching of prayer: the needs and desires of families attending supplementary schools as well as the backgrounds and abilities of teachers working in these schools. We begin with these contextual factors, followed by an examination of selected prepared curricular materials.

#### **Families Attending Supplementary Schools: Ambivalent Needs and Desires**

For the most part, the structure of supplementary schools has not changed drastically since the transition to the congregational school in the 1950s (Aron, 1994). They are modeled after public schools, complete with age-graded classes, teachers, standardized curricula, and report cards. The past century has witnessed a steady decline in the number of hours supplementary schools are in session (Aron, 1995; Pilch, 1969). Pilch suggests a reasonable explanation for the dwindling number of hours of Jewish study:

Better economic conditions, more leisure and higher level of education acquired by the majority of parents ... made it possible for them to desire and to afford for themselves and their children, music, dancing, frequent vacations, various sport activities, and other forms of recreation. This in turn, called for a weekday

afternoon school with limited hours of instruction and with schedules adjusted to approximately three-day-a-week attendance.

...

To the student of education it is a commonplace that the more time is available for learning of any subject, the greater is the opportunity for mastering skills, developing attitudes and learning subject matter. Curtailed hours of instruction of necessity curtailed the possibilities for a sound Jewish education. (p. 124)

As discussed in Chapter 3, commitment to Jewish life and traditions in the United States were often in a tug-of-war with competing interests in the larger society. These tensions continue to characterize the contemporary American Jewish experience. For example, some parents pressure principals to reduce the number of hours that students are in school as they themselves attempt to negotiate what it means to assimilate into U.S. society and retain a Jewish identity. For this reason and, no doubt, others, supplementary schools have steadily lost an important resource—time—since the beginning of the century (Pilch, 1969). The community supplementary school of the 1920s or 1930s maintained a schedule that provided students with approximately 400 instructional hours during the year. Schools were typically in session for 48 weeks a year, five days a week, for about 8 to 10 hours a week. The typical congregational supplementary school in the 1950s conducted classes for approximately 150 instructional hours yearly. Students were given longer vacations and classes met for fewer hours during the week (36 weeks, 5 or 6 hours of instruction weekly). Students went to supplementary school twice a week after school and once over the weekend, either on Saturday or Sunday, depending upon the congregation. Over the next several decades, hours continued to decline, so that now the average supplementary school student

attends class for approximately 120-150 hours a year (28-30 weeks, 4 or 5 hours of instruction weekly).

Today, there is, what many would consider, an important difference between typical Reform and typical Conservative supplementary schools. Children who attend a Reform supplementary school attend for approximately 4 hours per week—one weekday afternoon and Sunday morning. Students in Conservative congregations generally attend supplementary schools for approximately 5 or 6 hours-per-week—two weekday afternoons and Sunday morning as well.

Education scholars have often noted that schools are the stage upon which larger social trends play out. As Cohen and Neufeld note: “The schools are a great theater in which we play out these conflicts in the culture; they are the stage for the long war over the character of [American] adult life.” Just as this is so in general education, the same can be said about supplemental schools. By examining the supplementary school, we can learn a great deal about the nature of American Jewish life. For example, we easily detect that Jewish parents are ambivalent. They want to transmit to their children a solid grounding in their Jewish heritage. But they also wish for their children the opportunity to participate in programs that conflict with supplementary school hours and with traditional Judaism: Saturday soccer games, Friday night slumber parties, ballet classes which meet on the same afternoon that the supplementary school is in session. Parental ambivalence, argues Aron (1995), leads them to pressure synagogues to limit hours of weekly instruction.



Paradoxically, as hours of the supplementary school began to dwindle, the mandate of the supplementary school grew..As explained in Chapter 3, as Jewish observance in the home declined, community leaders detected increasing discomfort with traditional prayer. Thus, just as the burden of what to teach increased, the time that supplemental schools had to accomplish their many goals decreased. In addition, there was growing concern about the education and expertise of supplementary school teachers, an issue that deserves some attention here.

### **Supplementary School Teachers: Committed but Unprepared**

In the early 20th century, Jewish educators searched for ways of organizing schools that would meet the needs of families who were embracing the American public schools and the many other opportunities afforded U. S. citizens. Jewish educators struggled to create a place for Jewish education. The last chapter described the similarities and differences between the approaches of Eastern and Central European immigrants to Jewish education. By the 1930s and 40s, the overriding concerns of the architects of the supplementary schools included (1) the drive to create meaningful, modern educational systems; (2) the need to secure communal funds for Jewish education; and (3) the development of a professional literature, training programs, and organizations for teachers (Shevitz, 1988).

By the 1950s and 60s, the concerns of Jewish educators shifted from creating an infrastructure for Jewish schools to a serious teacher shortage (Shevitz 1988). Janowsky (1967) summarized the "crucial problem of the teacher" by describing

the range of problems, including uneven qualifications, part-time status, and poor salary and benefits. Janowsky also described the high expectations for pedagogical and curricular sophistication and the time handicap. Kaunfer (cited in Strassfeld, 1976) despondently asserted:

Jewish education is an unrewarding profession financially and in terms of status. It is also part-time work. The result of all this is that only the very dedicated or the very incompetent would choose to enter the field. (p. 208)

Kaunfer's assertion that many Jewish educators were probably incompetent is, of course, problematic, for proclaiming competence would mean achieving consensus on the knowledge and skills, commitments and capacities that a good Jewish educator would need to possess. No such consensus existed then, or now. Nonetheless, while we might disagree on what teachers need to know, many would agree that the quality of education in any school rests, in large measure, upon the knowledge, skills and commitments of its teachers. Of course other features of the school—such as its leadership, curriculum, and philosophy—have important roles to play. But clearly, a significant factor influencing what students learn in school is the teachers. In the 1980s, attention turned to the credentials and experiences of supplementary school teachers.

David Schoem's (1989) ethnographic study of a supplementary school in one suburban community paints a vivid picture of the supplementary school teachers. Schoem illuminates three important points about most supplementary school teachers. First, he notes that, for many teachers, there is a large discrepancy between what is being taught and how teachers live their lives:

One teacher, for instance, who told the researcher that in her personal life she did not use "Torah, Bible, or prayer," declared that

that was precisely what she wanted to teach at the school: Torah, Bible and prayer—I would not know how else to teach Hebrew school," she said. Another teacher reported that her goal in school was to "teach them enough Hebrew and prayer so that they can take part in prayers, holidays, and synagogue activities." However, this same teacher had the following to say about her own observances: "I feel uncomfortable in the synagogue and my husband is not interested—so we go very rarely." A third teacher, who in the classroom stressed the importance of adherence to ritual observance of Jewish holidays, said of her personal life, "My Jewishness is not that important to me. I won't close myself off to it, but I'm just not into it now." (pp. 63-64)

Schoem observes that, in general, the supplementary school teachers are not personally connected to the Judaism they are teaching. For them, Judaism was a subject to be taught, not necessarily a way of life. His research also suggests that many teachers, in their own lives, were not committed to the core principles of the school curriculum. For example, he described a 7th grade discussion of the Sabbath. First, the teacher asked in what ways the Sabbath was different from the other days of the week. In response to a student's answer that on "the Sabbath we pray," the teacher said, "But we pray every day." Both the teacher and student were speaking in theoretical terms. The teacher did not pray every day and the student, according to Schoem, had not been to synagogue in more than half a year. Schoem wrote that later in the lesson, the teacher, who was the manager of a restaurant and worked on Friday evenings, asked "Why don't we work on the Sabbath?" the students started to giggle, because the question was so ridiculous. He concluded:

Clearly, this lesson that was being discussed in first person terms, was in the students minds, about a people that was far removed from their own reality. (p. 64)

In addition, Schoem's research illuminated how the part-time nature of the supplementary school teacher's work had a negative impact on the teacher's commitment:

One teacher, who had two other part-time teaching jobs, a week-end youth group position, and attended college full-time remarked, "I sleep in my spare time." Another teacher, who was resentful that she "had no time for myself," ranked her teaching position after her half-time sales position, and her full-time studies. Another teacher worked part-time as a construction worker; a fourth as a full-time donut shop clerk; a fifth bought and opened a restaurant during the course of the school year. One teacher explained that she took the teaching position at Shalom School only "because I didn't have another job. I like to teach but I would prefer an all-day school or public school," she said. (p. 69)

The part-time issue is critical. Busy schedules and demands of more full-time concerns (work, family) make it very difficult for teachers to adequately prepare for lessons, invest themselves in their teaching, or find the time to participate in professional development.

Finally, Schoem claims that supplementary school teachers are often at a loss when it comes to creating engaging lessons. Teachers do not have the time to prepare adequately and they know little about pedagogy:

One teacher, who desired group discussions in his class, didn't realize that he consistently cut off discussion by his method of "answering" student opinions and thoughts. He also didn't understand that students in the back of the room could not read his small blackboard writing nor did he recognize that ten year old students might lose interest while learning about one prayer for an entire session.

Another inexperienced teacher plodded through centuries of Jewish history with names, facts and figures. Although she realized that her lectures were dull – it often seemed that even she was bored – she bemoaned the fact that she didn't know any other way to teach the subject.

A third teacher tried to use individualized study to teach the Torah Study Units developed by the rabbi. In doing so, however, he gave no instructions or explanations to the students except to tell them to read a short passage. The students, in turn, were lost without directions, and so they read out loud, talked to one another, rolled on the floor, and fooled around. Instead of spending the day on the Torah Units, the teacher ended up acting as a disciplinarian the entire session. In another example, two other teachers, one with considerable experience, brought their classes together to perform a play for the school on the Passover holiday. There was never any discussion of the play or its meaning, or of Passover. The students were merely given scripts (there was an insufficient number), told to choose parts, and only later were told that they would perform before others. On the day of the performance only a handful of students wore costumes, several students laughed through their parts, and neither teacher was present because they had made travel plans to be with family for the holiday. (pp. 90-91)

The sense one gets of the supplementary school teachers in this ethnography is that they were unaware of how to create a meaningful lesson plan and did not know different kinds of educational techniques which might make their teaching more effective. More recent research (Aron & Bank, 1985; Aron & Phillips, 1990; Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education [CIJE], 1994; Federation of Jewish Agencies of Greater Philadelphia, 1989; Sheskin, 1988) corroborates Schoem's study, suggesting that teachers in supplementary schools have an extremely limited understanding of Judaism and how to teach Judaism. Thus, while it is always dangerous to generalize from ethnographies and other small sample studies, it may be that the teachers and circumstances in Schoem's study are typical of other supplementary school settings.

Let us consider the CIJE study (1994), conducted in collaboration with the Atlanta, Milwaukee, and Baltimore Jewish communities. Data sources included surveys of nearly 1,000 teachers and interviews with 125 Jewish teachers, principals, and other educational leaders. CIJE found that teachers in

supplementary schools have relatively little formal preparation to be Jewish educators. Although 18% of supplementary school teachers have a certificate in Jewish education and 12% have a degree in Jewish studies, the CIJE study concluded that roughly two-thirds of supplementary school teachers had little or no formal Jewish training after Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

In contrast to formal Jewish training, the CIJE study did find that 41% of supplementary school teachers do have university degrees in education and an additional 5% have education degrees from teacher institutes. Almost half have worked in general education. One of the most interesting findings of the CIJE research has to do with teachers' classroom experiences: Most supplementary school teachers have considerable classroom experience.

Also noteworthy is the teachers' perseverance. CIJE findings indicate that 14% of supplementary school teachers have been in the field for more than 20 years; 24% for 10 and 20 years; and 29% for 6 to 10 years. Another 27% have worked in Jewish education for 2 to 5 years, and only 6% were in their first year at the time of the survey. Once a person decides to enter the field of Jewish education, it appears that they tend to stick with it for a while, perhaps switching schools, but not leaving the field completely. Combined with Schoem's finding that very busy people committed themselves to teaching in supplementary schools, it appears that Jewish educators – no matter their knowledge of Judaism or their pedagogical education – are seriously committed to the field.

## **The Critical Role of Curricular Materials**

Given the uneven preparation and knowledge of teachers, it is not surprising that most supplementary school principals rely on prepared curricular materials (Aron & Phillips, 1990). Well-prepared curricular materials are invaluable to school principals because they hold the potential for extending teachers' subject matter knowledge, giving them new ideas about how to teach in meaningful and appropriate ways, supporting some teachers' weak understanding of Hebrew, and offering teachers a sensible organization of the material.

Each liberal movement publishes prepared curricula. In addition, Behrman House, a nondenominational publisher, began publishing curricula in the middle of the last century. More recently, Torah Aura, another nondenominational publisher, began to publish materials for the supplementary school. The analysis I offer here is based on widely-used supplementary school prayer curricula used in third through seventh grades. The goal of my inquiry into these materials is to further our understanding of why the teaching of prayer in supplementary schools is so challenging. Before describing and commenting on the curricula, I briefly note the methods I used in this analysis.

## **Method of Analysis**

The curricula I examined were published by each of the liberal movements—Reconstruction, Reform and Conservative—as well as by two large non-denomination publishers in Jewish education, Torah Aura and Behrman House. I first asked publishers' representatives which of their curricula they thought were being most widely used. Since their estimates were impressionistic and non-

scientific estimates, I pursued several other sources: (1) I contacted the education departments of the Union of American Hebrew Congregation (Reform), United Synagogue of America (Conservative) and the Federation of Jewish Reconstructionist Congregations (Reconstructionist); (2) I spoke with representatives from the central agencies for Jewish Education in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Atlanta; (3) I contacted colleagues involved in Jewish education asking which materials they thought were most widely used, and (4) I called the two major nondenominational publishing houses. In total, I examined seven texts, described in Table 1.



**Table 1**  
**Comparison of Curricular Materials**

<p>Conservative</p> <p>Melton Research Center</p> <p>Dorph &amp; Kelman, 1982</p>	<p><i>Melton Curriculum</i></p> <p>This curriculum, developed for a five-year supplementary school program, is a comprehensive, integrated program covering <i>mitzvot</i>, holidays, and prayer. The Melton curriculum was written by an international team and develops from year to year in a spiral fashion. Ideas introduced in the early grades re-emerge in later years offering a broader, more expansive view of the subject matter.</p>
<p>Reform</p> <p>Union of American Hebrew Congregations</p> <p>Moskowitz, 1989</p>	<p><i>A Bridge to Prayer</i></p> <p>This curriculum is intended for pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students who already decode Hebrew well. It includes a two-volume textbook and a teacher's guide. The first five chapters in Volume 1 introduce students to general concepts of Jewish prayer including the "whys" of prayer, the history of Jewish worship, ways in which Jews discuss God, blessings as the building blocks of prayers and the structure of the worship service. The concluding chapters of Volume 1 and all of Volume 2 focus on specific prayers.</p>
<p>Reconstructionist</p> <p>Reconstructionist Press</p> <p>Schein, 1996</p>	<p><i>Connecting Prayer and Spirituality: Kol Haneshamah as a Creative Teaching and Learning Text</i></p> <p>This curriculum is an eclectic mix of essays and lesson plans intended for supplementary school teachers, rabbis, cantors, or educators working with either adults or children. The purpose of this resource is to enable teachers or those leading services to help their students find personal meaning in the liturgy.</p>
<p>Nondenominational</p> <p>Behrman House</p> <p>Kaye, 1992</p>	<p><i>The New Siddur Program and Hebrew through Prayer</i></p> <p>Two multiyear Hebrew curricula that rely on the liturgy as a vehicle for teaching Hebrew. Recognizing that most religious schools do not have time to teach Hebrew and prayer separately, these curricula combine the two subjects. It is intended for elementary school-age children.</p>
<p>Nondenominational</p> <p>Torah Aura</p> <p>Grishaver, 1988 Rowe, 1990</p>	<p><i>The All New Shema is For Real Curriculum and The Introduction to the Siddur</i></p> <p>These multiyear curricula assume that students can decode Hebrew and that the majority of their Hebrew studies revolve around the liturgy. The curriculum also addresses important aspects of Jewish thought</p>

After closely reading the curricula, I examined comparable lessons (when possible), looking for similarities and differences in the approaches to teaching

prayer. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) provide a useful metaphor for understanding my analysis of the prepared curricular materials:

Imagine a large gymnasium in which thousands of toys are spread out on the floor. You are given the task of sorting them into piles according to a scheme that you are to develop. You walk around the gym looking at the toys, picking them up, and examining them. There are many ways to form piles. They could be sorted according to size, color, country of origin, date manufactured, manufacturer, material they are made from, the type of play they encourage, the age group they suit, or whether they represent living things or inanimate objects. (p. 165)

This activity resembles my analysis. There were many ways I could organize my impressions of the materials I examined. I looked for themes, patterns in the lessons, or explanations about purpose. I took note of how much attention was devoted to particular pedagogical issues. By looking for coding categories, I tried to sort the curricula so that I could compare and contrast the materials and better understand how the challenges of teaching prayer in a supplementary school setting were reflected in the curricula.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) explain that, when sorting data, the purpose of the analysis determines how the data will be categorized:

If you were in the gym and you were told what the purpose of sorting the toys was – let us say, for example, that you were told they wanted piles so they could be sent back to the manufacturer – the task of developing codes would be considerably easier. Developing coding systems in qualitative research faces similar parameters. Particular research questions and concerns generate certain categories. (p. 166)

From my research about the supplementary schools, I knew that educators in the 1950s considered public performance or skill acquisition to be central to the teaching of prayer. As I explained in the last chapter, Greenberg (1938) was alone in his argument that the purpose of teaching prayer is to develop "personal

character and Jewish loyalty" (p. 32). As I examined the curricular materials, I then wondered how the teaching of prayer would be conceptualized for future generations of Jewish educators. Because of the historical analysis I had conducted, I was predisposed to consider how Hebrew reading skills would be addressed by the curricula.

In addition, as a Conservative rabbi, I am committed to prayer in Hebrew. So my personal commitments also influenced my decision to examine how Hebrew was integrated into the curricular materials that I examined. Also, as a rabbi, I encountered many Jews who were eager to find meaning in the traditional liturgy and wanted services to be spiritually uplifting. But often times these individuals found that Hebrew was a stumbling block.

For all these reasons, I could not help but wonder how Hebrew would figure into the prepared curricular materials. Would the purpose of the curriculum be to prepare students for public worship by enabling them to acquire necessary Hebrew skills? Or would the purpose of the curriculum be to help students think about important Jewish ideas?

To answer these questions, I systematically examined the curricular materials by dividing them according to the age of the learner and examining their similarities and differences. Then I read lessons from each of the curricula on particular prayers. I was looking for clues about how the curriculum writers addressed particular age groups and particular prayers. I hoped that, by comparing and contrasting the curricula in two different ways, I would get a clearer understanding of the materials.

Clearly, mine was not a comprehensive analysis, for an entire inquiry could be devoted to the analysis of curricular texts. Instead, my analysis is focused on the theme of this inquiry: How have generations of Jewish educators grappled with issues related to the teaching of prayer and praying. Across the texts I examined from this perspective, certain challenges, both implicit and explicit, became apparent. In this section, I begin by explaining this tension in general terms. Then I examine how each curriculum addresses the tension.

### **The Tension between Teaching Hebrew and Teaching Prayers**

The Hebrew language is essential to teaching prayer, for prayers are traditionally recited in Hebrew. As a result, curriculum writers have to decide about how the Hebrew language will figure into the curriculum. Questions the curriculum writers grapple with include: Should there be an emphasis on Hebrew reading? If Hebrew is incorporated into the curriculum, is the purpose to enable students to become competent readers? Or is the goal to teach them enough Hebrew to help them understand the general meaning of the prayers? Is the curriculum designed to teach important concepts found in each of the prayers? Yet prayer can easily be understood as an intensely personal experience. While participating in community worship is an important aspect of the experience, there is more to Jewish prayer than reciting the Hebrew liturgy.

Prayer is also inextricably bound to belief in God (Dorff, 1992; Wolpe, 1990). To whom, after all, does one pray, if not to God? It would seem then that a prayer curriculum must help learners understand Jewish ideas and concepts about God, while also helping them develop a personal relationship with God. Thus,

curriculum writers grapple with other questions, such as: Should the curriculum aim to help students connect personally to the ancient prayers? Are students encouraged to explore their own feelings and ideas about liturgy or are they led to believe that all of the liturgy should be completely accepted as truth? Is learning Jewish prayer an opportunity to learn traditional Jewish thought? Is the classroom a place for students to find personal meaning in the prayer book?

Let us now consider how various curricula attempted to resolve the often times conflicting objectives bound up in the teaching of prayer.

### **Reconstructionist: Personal Meaning Paramount, Hebrew Minimal**

This one-volume notebook is an eclectic collection of materials intended to help teachers address the spiritual aspects of Jewish prayer. *Connecting Prayer and Spirituality: Kol Haneshamah as a Creative Teaching and Learning Text* (Schein, 1996) includes about 50 pieces written by liberal educators, rabbis and cantors. The materials span a broad spectrum, including lesson plans, plays, games, curricula and thoughtful essays about issues to consider when teaching prayer to either children or adults. The entries are organized into the following categories: "Preface and Introductory Materials," "Approaching the *Siddur*," "Teaching and Learning the *Siddur*," "Using the *Siddur*," "Making the *Siddur* your Friend: Your *Siddur* Safari."

In the introduction to *Connecting Prayer and Spirituality: Kol Haneshama as a Creative Teaching and Learning Text* (Schein, 1996), Teutsch argues:

Studying Jewish prayer is a complex task. The *siddur* has rightly been described as containing a history of the Jewish heart. One key aspect of study in Jewish prayer is understanding the history, structure, and themes of the Jewish prayer book. Given its complex

history and many layers, this is by itself no small task. But studying the *siddur* in this fashion alone is a bit like examining the literature of an ancient civilization. Understanding it does not guarantee empathy or active engagement. Jewish liturgy is to be studied by us not merely for the purpose of understanding its ancient roots and gradual development. We study it in order to be able to participate in it as a part of our lives. (p. 5)

The purpose of this Reconstructionist guide is to launch the study of prayer in a way that enables pray-ers to make a personal connection to the liturgy. Schein wanted to produce a resource that did not focus primarily on skills acquisition or the history of prayer, but rather one that brought another perspective to the teaching and learning of Jewish prayer. The guide's premise is that, by studying and learning the ideas of the prayer book, Jewish prayer can become meaningful to individuals and communities. For example, in Aviva Batya Bass's essay, "A Prayer Service for Ages Four to Seven," the following goals are articulated:

The children should come away with a knowledge of some of the basic prayers and key words of the Jewish morning liturgy and a passive knowledge of the structure. ... *More importantly* [italics added] however, the students should feel that they have a forum for personal spiritual expression within a Jewish religious context. (Schein, 1996, p. 187)

The most important goal in this curriculum is creating a forum for personal expression. The focus of most learning activities is on learners growing spiritually by connecting personally to the liturgy. In an essay entitled "Nurturing Students' Spirituality and Prayerfulness," Roberta Louis Goodman suggests that:

a major role of Jewish education involves deepening, enriching, and perhaps uncovering the spirituality and prayerfulness that is already found in our students. Our tradition's prayers address human emotions and longings. Our students do not come to prayer as empty vessels. At any age, they come filled with experiences, feelings, ideas, hopes, and aspirations that can be enriched by our tradition's prayers as well as enrich our understanding of those prayers. The task becomes one of interweaving the prayers and

modes of praying from our tradition with the person's spiritual orientation and life experiences. (Schein, 1996, pp. 67-68)

Goodman's assumption is that Jewish educators should be nurturing children's spirituality and prayerfulness. Her essay is an attempt to help teachers integrate James Fowler's theory on faith development into their work with children.

Not only are many of the entries in the Reconstructionist collection concerned with enabling students to connect with the words of the liturgy, there are also several lesson plans intended to help students grasp the meaning of the prayers. For example, Deborah Waxman's lesson plan "*Shema Uvirhoteha*" [*Shema* and its accompanying blessings] for ages Twelve to Seventeen," is intended to enable students to know the ideas of the traditional prayers and to understand the structure of the morning service. The lesson plan includes five rhyming paragraphs that correspond to the traditional liturgy:

Of this chain of blessings, I do start  
That's one of the ways I play my part  
Here I call all to prayer if there are 10 women and men  
But I'm sung to a different tune when to the Torah someone comes  
to stand

God in nature, I do explore  
Creator, maker, fashioner and more  
The many names of God I do praise  
Like maker of peace and creator of days  
Officially I'm the first berahah of this group when we say the  
morning prayer  
Though I come in second when the call to worship 10 people share

God loves us and loves us, without cease  
Is the main theme of the third piece  
Because of this love a great gift did God give  
Teaching and laws by which we can live

The core  
The point  
I am the central thought  
The prayer that from a young age Jews are taught  
I follow love and precede redemption  
And of the *mitzvot* of *tallit*, *tefillin* and *mezuzah* I make mention

Last but not least, I wrap up the chain  
God is our champion and redeemer is what I claim  
I quote from great moments in our history  
Like when the people, Moses and Miriam stood at the Red Sea  
(Schein, 1996, p. 140)

Each of these paragraphs was to be on a note card. Students were to work in small groups, place the note cards in a proper order and match each note card with the appropriate traditional text. The purpose of Waxman's lessons was for students to learn the ideas of the liturgy and to understand the structure of the service.

Hebrew skills acquisition is not a curricular focus for Waxman. This minimalist approach to Hebrew is seen in the Reconstructionist curricular guide (Schein, 1996). According to its editor, it was a response to a situation in which too many supplementary schools were relying exclusively on Hebrew curricula for the teaching of prayer (phone interview with Schein, July 1998). Believing that Hebrew skills acquisition was the focus in too many classrooms, Schein produced a resource which was intended to enable teachers to go beyond mere Hebrew skills. This guide is intended to launch the study of prayer in a way that enables pray-ers to make a spiritual connection to prayer. There are no articles or lesson plans devoted to Hebrew; Schein's goal was to create a resource to enable teachers to make prayers and praying meaningful to students.



## **Conservative: Conceptual Ideas Primary, Hebrew an Adjunct**

The Melton curriculum devotes much attention to the significant ideas of the liturgy. Very little attention is devoted to Hebrew. The curriculum writers wanted students to be comfortable talking about the prayers and the core concepts. The teacher's guide to the prayer curriculum begins:

Inevitably, a unit on prayer should begin with some reflection about God. Our goal in the first lessons of the unit is to raise this issue in a discussion, to open up the possibility of talking about God in the religious school. If we are not going to talk about God in our religious schools, where then will we? And yet, it is often true that teachers avoid this important topic. (Dorph & Kelman, 1979, p. 145)

The curriculum writers assert that students in a supplementary school should be talking about God, especially when studying Jewish prayer. Students are to be encouraged to share their ideas and ask questions about God. The curriculum assumes that people have asked questions about God throughout human history. It also assumes that within Judaism, questioning, doubting, and reflecting are acceptable and even commendable enterprises.

In addition to encouraging students to question, wonder, and doubt, the curriculum teaches basic Jewish ideas about God. For example, children are taught that God created the world, and Torah is God's gift of love to the Jewish people. Most lessons are devoted to enabling students to understand the meaning or ideas of the liturgy. For example, the lesson for third or fourth graders introduces study of the *Shema*. The purpose of the lesson is to help students understand how the *Shema* is a "Jewish pledge of allegiance." Students are asked to restate the pledge of allegiance in their own words. After students

rephrase the pledge in their own words, the teacher is told to either use one of the students' versions or write the following on the board.

I promise my loyalty to the government of the United States of America. I promise to live by the ideas for which that government stands. Some of those ideas are liberty and justice for everyone.  
(Dorph & Kelman, 1982, p. 50)

In the script for the teacher, the curriculum continues:

When we recite the *Shema* and *Ve'ahavta* we are reciting our Jewish pledge of allegiance. We are saying: I promise my loyalty to the one God. I promise my loyalty to the ideas for which our God stands as expressed in the Torah. One of the ways by which I show this loyalty is by putting a *mezuzah* on the doorpost of my house.  
(Dorph & Kelman, 1982, p. 51)

The lesson plan continues with the analogy by explaining that just as there is a way to stand when reciting the pledge, there are people who close their eyes when they say the first line of the *Shema*. The lesson plan suggests that the teacher then demonstrate how this is done. Clearly, the purpose of this lesson is to enable students to understand what the *Shema* is saying, aiming to represent it to students in a meaningful way. While the curriculum writers explicitly state that Hebrew is important, the bulk of each lesson is devoted to enabling students' understanding of important concepts about God, as expressed in the liturgy. The instructions for practicing the Hebrew text are vague. For example, at the end of the second lesson on the *Shema* after the final activity there is a note to the teacher:

Hebrew drill and practice should begin with focus on those lines that have already been pointed out in the course of discussion.  
(Dorph & Kelman, 1982, p. 67)

The Hebrew exercises are not considered a core activity of the lesson; they are in addition to the other five activities. It is noteworthy that the Hebrew prayer

book intended for children included Hebrew texts that were not age-appropriate. The size of the print is small, much too small for children in the elementary grades. Also, although the developers reiterate that practicing the Hebrew prayers is essential, the primary emphasis of each lesson is on the meaning of the prayers. Hebrew exercises are always the final activity of the lesson, almost an afterthought. A curriculum that is generally very directive leaves it for teachers to figure out for themselves how to do effective Hebrew drill exercises. However, the Melton curriculum writers are committed rhetorically to the acquisition of solid Hebrew skills.

We cannot emphasize strongly enough the need for practice of the Hebrew fluency component of this prayer curriculum. It is what will enable students to participate in the synagogue services (Dorph & Kelman, 1982, p. 4)

In reality, the curriculum writers focus on key concepts, leaving Hebrew to be taught in another place in the curriculum. The Melton curriculum is very detailed and specific, including comprehensive background materials for teachers, scripted lesson, and prepared age-appropriate worksheets.

In conclusion, the Melton curriculum exemplifies the major challenge in teaching prayer. The curriculum writers recognize the need for students to learn Hebrew skills and significant concepts. They explicitly argue that both Hebrew skills and key concepts are equally critical. But in practice, the curricular materials emphasize key concepts, theological issues, and personal meaning, leaving Hebrew for another place in the curriculum.

## **Reform: Personal Meaning Stressed, Hebrew Is Integrated Into Each Lesson**

*Bridge to Prayer* (Moskowitz, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c) focuses on both the ideas of the prayer book and enabling students to acquire the Hebrew skills necessary to be comfortable with the prayer book. In the introduction to the Teacher's Guide, Moskowitz (1989c) explains that most lessons include:

explanatory texts with student exercises interspersed. This format allows students to interact with discreet bits of information—to read a few paragraphs and then immediately process the ideas with exercises that are designed to highlight general prayer concepts, teach key words in Hebrew, create a bridge between the student's personal life and the words of the prayer book. (p. 1)

While the purpose of this curriculum is to help students understand, appreciate and relate to the words of the prayer book, it also assumes responsibility for skill acquisition. It provides teachers with several tools for teaching Hebrew reading. In the Teacher's Guide, Moskowitz (1989c) explains:

To feel comfortable students must not only be able to connect personally with the individual prayers of our Siddur, but must also be able to read the Hebrew fluently. (p. 1)

To support teachers working towards this objective, each lesson that introduces a new prayer includes drills to improve reading skills. The top of each page includes almost all of the Hebrew words found in the prayer being studied. Words are grouped either by phonic or grammatical principles.<sup>39</sup> The bottom of the page contains the actual text of the prayer taken from Gates of Prayer, the Reform prayer book. The text is not translated, but it is enlarged and "broken into

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<sup>39</sup> The phonetic groups are intended to "build visual discrimination skills, and often provide a useful rhythm for reading words that, at first glance, look alike" (Moskowitz, 1989c, p. 3). The grammatical groupings are intended to teach and challenge students of higher abilities, including those in full [time Hebrew] day schools (Moskowitz, 1989, p. 3).

meaningful phrases [so that students will learn] where to take a breath and where to pause for the sake of meaning" (Moskowitz, 1989c, p. 3). According to the curriculum's author, Hebrew reading skills are essential if students are to become comfortable in the synagogue. Each page of each lesson has Hebrew on it. Prayers are referred to by their Hebrew names and are written in Hebrew letters. The conclusion of each lesson includes several lines of Hebrew reading drills and also versions of the entire blessing that are in a large font and easy to read. The Reform curriculum also strives to help students understand the meaning of the liturgy and the context of individual prayers within services. The curriculum then asks students to evaluate the text, based upon their own beliefs about God. It goes beyond the rote reciting of liturgy and the pat answering of factual questions, to the development of a personal approach to prayer. For example, students are given sentences that prayers use to describe God's powers:

*Adonai*<sup>40</sup> is our God.  
*Adonai* is our Ruler.  
*Adonai* saves us from those who want to harm us.  
*Adonai* performs miracles.  
*Adonai* gives us our life.  
*Adonai* performed miracles in Egypt for our ancestors.  
*Adonai* led the Jews out of Egypt.  
*Adonai* helps us live as free people. (Moskowitz, 1989a, p. 50)

Students are asked which statements they believe to be true. By doing this, the curriculum does more than tell students what Jews have traditionally believed about God. It encourages students to reject, question, and challenge aspects of the liturgy. Students are being taught that it is acceptable to think critically about Jewish liturgy.

## **Torah Aura: Hebrew and Personal Meaning: Equal Time**

Torah Aura originally published versions of *The All New Shema is for Real Curriculum* (Grishaver, 1988, revised in 1991) in the mid 1980s. The curriculum was well received by teachers and principals. Educators embraced the idea of teaching the meaning of the prayers, while also teaching students how to pray. Their major concern was that the curriculum was too complex for most supplementary school teachers. Because there was so much material in the curriculum, teachers were not sure how to edit the lessons effectively. The *Introduction to the Siddur* (Rowe, 1990) curriculum was created as a response to those concerns. Its attempt to balance Jewish thought, personal meaning, and Hebrew is comparable to *The All New Shema is for Real Curriculum*. The major difference is that the lessons are shorter and the teacher is given fewer options. Also *The Introduction to the Siddur* includes both the traditional and the Reform and Conservative liturgy. The universal complaint about this curriculum was that it was too complex.

While the Torah Aura curriculum incorporates Hebrew in the entire lesson, the focus of its materials goes well beyond skills acquisition. The curriculum developer, Joel Grishaver, believes a good curriculum on Jewish prayer is also a course in Jewish thought. In addition, he wanted students to learn about God. He wrote (1991a):

If you only teach students to pronounce prayers in the prayer book, then, with a little luck, you may never need to talk about God. Even if you avoid the questions in class, once they realize that what they are sounding out loud are prayers, your students will still be

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<sup>40</sup> *Adonai* is a Hebrew name for God. It means "my Lord".

wondering about those questions. The longer you avoid them, the more they will suspect that God is not listening, that She may not exist, and that praying to Him makes no differences (except for social status concerns). If you are going to get students to deal with prayer as a real life process then you must talk about God. (pp. 13-14)

Grishaver claims that any serious course on Jewish prayer must address questions about God. For a course on Jewish prayer to be meaningful and worthwhile, students must come away knowing more than how to recite Hebrew prayers. Students must understand how Jewish thought is articulated through the prayer book.

At the same time, both of the Torah Aura curricula devote a great deal of attention to Hebrew skills. For example, in the student text the first page after the table of contents (Rowe 1991a) include the following "Mastery Chart":

**Table 2**  
**Mastery Chart**

I can read	I know the theme	I know when to say	I can understand	Prayer
				Evening <i>Barchu</i>
				<i>Maariv Aravim</i>
				<i>Ahavat Olam</i>
				<i>Shema</i>
				<i>Geula</i>
				<i>Hashkeveinu</i>
				Morning <i>Yotzer Or</i>
				<i>Ahavah Rabbah</i>
				<i>Shema</i>
				<i>Geulah</i>

Here Hebrew is neither an addition to the lesson, nor tacked onto the end.

Rather, Hebrew skills are an integral part of each lesson. Each time a prayer is

introduced, the lesson begins with a vocabulary chart intended to help students become more familiar with the meaning of the Hebrew words.

Many, if not most, lessons begin with Hebrew exercises. An effort is made to help students learn basic rules about the Hebrew language such as common prefixes and suffixes. Also, the curricula teaches students that most Hebrew words have a three letter root and that understanding the Hebrew helps one appreciate subtle points about the prayers. For example, in *Shema & Company* (Grishaver, 1991b), there is a lesson about the first blessing before the *Shema* recited in the evening. Students are asked to translate five verbs and figure out the tense of each verb. They are then asked the following questions:

What pattern do you find?  
What does the tense of these verbs teach you about creation?  
Why is this important? (p. 86)

By studying these Hebrew words and taking notices of the tense of the verbs, the student learns that for Jews, God continues to create and renew the world every day. Creation is not something that happened once long ago. Rather, God is constantly remaking the world.

Exercises in each lesson also require students to examine the Hebrew text of a blessing. For example, in part two of Lesson 30 (Rowe, 1991a), the top of the page has three Hebrew sentences. At the bottom of the page, students are asked to complete the following three questions:

What root is most common in this section?  
What does it mean?  
What theme does it give this prayer? (p. 114)



Each prayer that is taught includes and depends upon exercises designed to enable students to develop their reading skills and to make sense of Hebrew words in the prayers.

At the core of this Hebrew approach is a concentration on the estimation of meaning. Much like a math student who is taught to estimate rather than calculate certain kinds of problems, we train students to use their extant knowledge of roots and patterns to approximate the meanings of passages, refining their skills through practice. (Grishaver, 1991a, p. 12)

### **Behrman House: Hebrew Paramount, Personal Meaning Minimal**

Of all the curricula I examined, the Behrman House curricula focus the most attention on the Hebrew language. This becomes clear by examining the publisher's catalogue. The two curricula devoted to prayer and Hebrew—*Hebrew through Prayer* (Kaye, Trager & Mason, 1994, 1995, 1996) and *The New Siddur Program* (Tamor & Tamor, 1990, 1991, 1992)—are listed under Hebrew, as opposed to being listed under prayer. The curricula focus almost exclusively on fluent Hebrew reading and public performance of the prayers. Taking into account that most religious schools do not have time to teach Hebrew and prayer separately, Behrman House combines the two subjects. The following explanation is offered in the educational director's guide to *Hebrew through Prayer* (1998):

Many religious schools have limited time for Hebrew instruction. A prayer curriculum provides a structure and a clearly defined amount of material to cover. Progress and achievement in a prayer program can be quantified and assessed. Can the students read the prayer fluently? Do they understand the key words in the prayer? Can they verbalize its theme? Do they know where it fits in the prayer service? Can they present the prayer fluently and with ease in public? (p. 1-4)

Notice the skills that are considered critical for students to acquire: fluent reading of prayers in public, recognition of key Hebrew prayer words, and general knowledge of certain prayers.

In the educational director's guide to *The New Siddur Program* (1994), Terry Kaye, explains the goals to the curriculum as follows:

- Learn to decode (Primer)
- Understand words, prayer and stories (Book 1)
- Recognize grammatical concepts; understand that Hebrew is root-based (Book 2)
- Discuss the main ideas of key prayers (Book 3) [pp. 1-5]

The focus is on enabling students to read Hebrew prayers. As explained in Kaye's explanation of the curriculum, it is not until Book 3 that students begin discussing the main ideas of the key prayers.

In both Behrman House Hebrew curricula, prayers are presented as texts for a Hebrew lesson. Though conceptual ideas are discussed, the primary purpose of the curriculum is to promote prayer-reading with some minimal comprehension, as well as public prayer performance. The rationale is that Hebrew is the lynchpin of Jewish identity. It provides bonds among Jews around the world, connecting Jews to Israel as well. Knowledge of Hebrew allows students access to sacred texts and it allows them to participate in any synagogue in the world. Hebrew skills, at the expense of personal meaning or conceptual thinking, are the focus of the Behrman House curriculum.

### **The Curricular Landscape**

In summary, the Reconstructionist guide does not include any formal Hebrew exercises and focuses almost exclusively on personal issues related to prayer.

The Conservative movement's Melton curriculum includes some Hebrew at the end of each prayer unit but essentially addresses only key concepts in prayer. The Reform curriculum, *Bridge to Prayer*, incorporates some Hebrew reading exercises at the end of each lesson and all key words are written in Hebrew. Still, this curriculum devotes the majority of each lesson to encouraging students to understand, analyze and evaluate the liturgy. The Torah Aura materials integrate Hebrew and Jewish thought so that each lesson devotes almost an equal amount of time to both lessons. And finally, the Behrman House curricula focus almost exclusively on Hebrew skills.

All of the curricula writers believed that a worthwhile prayer curriculum has to include Hebrew. They all agreed that the supplementary school is responsible for enabling students to become fluent with the Hebrew prayer book. The various curricular approaches suggest that determining how Hebrew is to be integrated into the supplementary school prayer curriculum is one of the most significant challenges in the teaching of prayer, especially given the limited number of hours schools are in session.

A close examination of the curricula reveals that the curriculum writers had contrasting formulas for determining how much time to devote to these critical issues and how much time to devote to skills acquisition. Those curricula that emphasized Hebrew had less time to devote to enabling students to explore some of the important conceptual issues related to prayer. And those curricula that focused on theology and/or concepts had less time to devote to Hebrew. Close analysis of the prepared curricula is instructive because it demonstrates

just how complicated it is to teach prayer in the supplementary school. These materials were created by some of the finest Jewish educators in the country. Yet no consensus emerged from this analysis that shed light on how practitioners should go about teaching prayer in a supplementary school. Consider the Reform and Conservative curricula. One might have expected that the Reform curriculum would include less Hebrew than the Conservative one, given that worship in English is more commonly accepted in the Reform movement. Yet, examination of Conservative and Reform curricula reveals that Reform curricula integrate Hebrew into nearly every lesson.

### **What Accounts for the Changing Ideas about Teaching Prayer?**

What caused the shift in curricular materials from memorizing prayers to addressing the ideas expressed in the prayers? Historically there had always been an emphasis on children learning *how to pray*. Greenberg (1938) clearly describes the situation:

The curriculum ... was based on the doctrine that reverence of the Lord is not only the beginning but the goal of all wisdom. That reverence was to be expressed in every act a Jew performed. But among these acts, daily recitation of traditional prayers was to occupy a pre-eminent position. ... the prayer book was and remains to this day the dominant, almost the exclusive, subject of study for the pupil until he acquires a high proficiency in the ability to read its contents fluently. Skill in the use of the prayer book was the indispensable first step that the Jewish child had to make on his path towards proper participation in Jewish life. (p. 28)

Describing what American Jews understood about the prayer book, Greenberg claimed that most Jews only knew how to read Hebrew and follow the order of the service. He was certain that it was the unusual American Jew who had *any* knowledge of the contents of the prayers. In the late 1930s and early

40s, as discussed in Chapter 3, he urged American Jewish educators to teach the ideas of the prayer book so that they could help develop Jewish character. He argued that the purpose of teaching prayer should be to mold character, strengthen the child's inner life, and deepen Jewish loyalties. Greenberg articulated a need for a paradigm shift in the teaching of prayer.

In 1964, one of Greenberg's articles was the lead article in an anthology devoted to the teaching of prayer in the Jewish school. Apparently, the situation was still essentially unchanged from the 1930s. Prayer was still being taught by rote, and the teaching of prayer was not being used as a vehicle for developing character or Jewish loyalty. "The pupil remembered his prayer book period as a time when he read some meaningless passages with the teacher being obviously more bored than the pupil himself" (Greenberg, 1938, p. 29).

What happened in American Jewish life such that, by the 1980s and 90s, curricula writers were hard at work trying to incorporate the ideas of the liturgy into the teaching of prayer? Why, rather suddenly, did so many Jewish educators focus on meaning of the prayers?

In many ways, 1971 was a watershed year for the teaching of prayer. Dr. Saul Wachs completed his dissertation entitled, *An Application of Inquiry Teaching to the Seedur* (sic). In addition, Burt Jacobson published *Teaching the Traditional Liturgy*. Both of these publications assume there is much more to the teaching of prayer than memorizing Hebrew prayers and rote recitation of the liturgy. Wachs introduced the inquiry method to the study of the prayer book. He asserts that, "knowledge of the ideas in a prayer make possible a deeper and more sustained

emotional response to the prayer than where such knowledge is lacking" (p. 69). Wachs believes that it is possible for students to grasp prayer concepts through class discussions. His dissertation describes an approach to the teaching of prayer that involves students actively uncovering the meaning of the prayers.

Like Wachs, Jacobson recognized there was more to the teaching of prayer than rote memorization. He argues that, "the rote method may habituate the student to traditional worship modes, but by itself it does not touch the intellectual and emotional needs of most youngsters" (p. 4).

Jacobson believes the ideas of the prayer book are important and should figure into the teaching of prayer. He describes two additional approaches to the teaching of prayer: the historical approach and the value and idea approach.

The historical approach "attempts to give the student knowledge about the origins of a prayer and the prayer book" (p. 3). If students understand the history of the prayer book, they can grasp the human developmental dimension. The historical approach may show the student the history of the prayer or the prayer book but, according to Jacobson, "but this does not mean that the prayer is going to take on life within the child's own soul" (p. 4).

The idea-value approach that Jacobson describes is an attempt to expose the student to the rabbinic understanding of the relationship between God and the Jewish people and to bring the student a sense of commitment through the student's intellect. This approach deals with the cognitive elements in worship but, according to Jacobson:

as it is practiced in many schools it does not give the child room for genuine personal reaction; it presents to him a ready-made mode

of worship and theological system which he should or must accept as the Jewish religious framework. (p. 4)

In describing these two approaches to the teaching of prayer, Jacobson argues that both the rote verbal memorization, the historical approach and the value and idea approach to teaching prayer are all limiting in their own ways. His approach to the teaching of prayer builds on these approaches, but it considers "the development of a child's inner life" (p. 4). He explains:

I believe therefore, that a program of worship for children in this age range, while certainly utilizing elements from all the above mentioned approaches, should concentrate on an open poetic exploration of the root experiences that become liturgy. This can give our students a sense of how Jews and the family of man have reacted to the wondrous, the mysterious, the momentous—perhaps even the tragic. (p. 5)

Notice both Jacobson and Wachs are suggesting that there is much more to the teaching of prayer than Hebrew reading skills. Both believe that an important part of the teaching of prayer is conceptual. Students need an opportunity to learn the big ideas of Jewish prayer. Rather than just reiterating Greenberg's point, both Jacobson and Wachs further the discussion of the teaching of prayer by creating curricular materials intended to teach key concepts of Jewish liturgy.

Wachs' dissertation describes an approach to the teaching of prayer that involves students actively uncovering the meaning of the prayers. The teacher's role is "as a kind of orchestra conductor leading the class to discover what he has put before them" (p. 76).

While students are actively involved in the learning process, the teacher is the leader, directing the discussion and making strategic decisions about the nature of the discussion. Wachs does acknowledge that there are novel situations when

the student will offer an interpretation or an insight that is unknown to the teacher. "In this novel situation the conductor lays down his baton and becomes a player, joining his fellow students in search for truth" (Wachs, 1971, p. 77). Notice how similar Wachs' conceptualization of the teacher is to Schwab's (1969).

The role of the instructor in such operations is both dominant and demanding. It is demanding in three respects. First, he must know the work under analysis through and through. Second, he must be equally familiar with the varieties of questions and attacks which can be made on such a work, know what sorts of treatment they constitute, and be willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of each such attack within the limits of what it can do. Third, he must be alertly and sensitively mindful of what each student is saying and doing, not only in the moment but in the whole course of the discussion. (pp. 66-67)

The role of the teacher is to raise issues and ask questions for students to consider and discuss. The teacher directs the lesson and enables students to "sample the ideas in the *Seedur*" (p. 85). In rare moments, the teacher joins the class and allows the student to become the teacher.

Jacobson also intends to teach the ideas of the prayers through classroom inquiry. The purpose of the teaching of prayer is to heighten "the student's ability to concretize and validate or correct his intuitive grasp of the prayer, and to allow him to learn the poetic tools that give depth to the meaning. Such a grasp, won by discovery, may give the student a deep sense of identity with the concerns of the traditional prayers. Jacobson says that the goals of teaching prayer are:

1. To uncover the common experiences that underlie the author's prayer in the interests of the students, and to thereby broaden the student's sensitivities so that he realizes there are common experiences that all men undergo; to understand the particularly Jewish symbolic framework within which this can be carried out.
2. To develop an understanding of an empathetic appreciation for



the experiences and language of Jewish religious poets of the past.

3. To give the students the tools for literary analysis which they will be able to use in connection with any prayer or with poetry.

4. To show that the faith encountered with God is a genuine possible way of grappling with ultimate questions.

Finally there is the question of relevance which will have been touched n throughout the preceding modes of analysis, but not yet dealt with directly. (p. 15)

To achieve these goals, he assumes that the teacher will create a classroom environment that encourages students to be open and honest about their feelings and ideas. Teachers are expected to guide the classroom discussions, encourage students to think, and also be knowledgeable about the ideas of the prayer.

It is worth noting that both Jacobson and Wachs were working with the Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Jacobson's work was published by the Center and Wachs acknowledges the staff of the Melton Research Center in the introduction to his dissertation.

What was the Melton Research Center and how did it contribute to the curricula scene? The Melton Research Center, a department of The Teachers Institute Seminary College of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was established in September 1960, by a grant from Samuel Melton of Columbus, Ohio. Its purpose was to investigate ways of improving Jewish education in the supplementary school. The educators from the Melton Center worked closely *with* two eminent scholars in the field of curriculum, Professors Joseph Schwab and Ralph Tyler. Both had a profound influence on the direction and work of the Melton Center.

Tyler cautioned the educators that it was critical to deliberate carefully before commissioning curricular projects. Schwab focused on the practical aspects of curriculum writing. He argued that the curriculum had to take into account what already existed in Jewish schools, being mindful of constraints and possibilities. In a newsletter of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education (1977) we learn that both Tyler and Schwab

warned that the products of the new curricular movement (the new math, the new physics, the new biology, etc.) had often been distorted in the classroom because materials being produced considered only one of the important aspects of curriculum, the subject matter. (p. 2)

They believed that it was important to consider four commonplaces when doing curriculum development. To this end Schwab (1978) argued that

defensible educational thought must take account of four commonplaces of equal rank: the learner, the teacher, the milieu, and the subject matter. None of these can be omitted without omitting a vital factor in educational thought and practice. (p. 371)

Coordination, not superordination or subordination, is the proper relation of these four commonplaces ... representatives of all four commonplaces must be included in the deliberating group from the start. Almost as obvious is the need that these representatives be men who are not overawed by the scholar. (p. 372)

In addition to the subject matter, curriculum writers must consider the child, the teacher, and the society in the curriculum writing process. Notice Schwab is arguing that the curriculum writing process must be conducted by capable individuals who are able to think critically about all of the commonplaces.

If not, Schwab feared educators would identify subjects as important and perhaps even find new and exciting ways to develop the material only to have their efforts negated by later findings that the subject was not appropriate for

children or the teachers are not able or willing to teach that particular subject. As a result of Tyler and Schwab's recommendations, the Melton curricula asked the following questions:

In light of the limitations of time and money and considering the nature of our teachers, students, parents and the community, what is it that our children should learn? How should our teachers teach so that the ideas presented might be internalized and affect the thinking, feeling and behavior of our children? (Melton newsletter, 1977, p. 2)

It seems reasonable to argue that the intellectual milieu of the Melton Research Center influenced the work of both Jacobson and Wachs. While many educators had once assumed that the teaching of prayer should prepare children to recite Hebrew words clearly and quickly, Jacobson and Wachs—having encountered the ideas of educational luminaries like Schwab and Tyler—had to ask themselves questions like:

How can we strike a balance between teaching understanding of the prayers and developing the skills to recite them properly? How can we prepare a child to become a member of a *tzibbur*, a praying community? (Melton newsletter, 1977, p. 1)

The insights and answers provided by Schwab and Tyler, and more recently Jacobson and Wachs, have paved the way for today's Jewish educators to think much differently about the teaching of prayer and its relationship to the teaching of Hebrew. To further understand the challenges of teaching prayer in the supplementary school, I turn in the next chapter to my own teaching experiences. Like Jacobson and Wachs, I tried to strike a balance that would enable students concurrently to think critically, relate to the liturgy, and develop the skills necessary to become competent at praying.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**"WHY WOULD YOU SAY A PRAYER**  
**IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE WHAT IT SAYS?":**  
**EXAMINING MY TEACHING OF PRAYER**

Up to this point, I have examined the teaching of prayer through documents such as curricula, histories, and the like. My observations and analyses have resonated with me, for as a rabbi, I teach prayer and praying. In this chapter, I examine my own practice. There are many reasons why the research in this chapter appeals to me. First and foremost, I am a practitioner. I have devoted my professional career to teaching. As a Jewish educator, I believe I can make the biggest impact on the Jewish community by continuing to teach. It is my hope that, through research in and on my own practice, I will develop further as a thoughtful, innovative and effective Jewish educator. Finally, I presume that the struggles other educators and rabbis have encountered play themselves out in my own teaching as well. I offer this analysis as an insider's view of how difficult it is to teach prayer.

I weave autobiography throughout this analysis, for my own story and values shaped what I did, what I saw, and how I made sense of my teaching. By the time I was 30 years old, I had a reputation as a gifted teacher. Colleagues in Jewish education invited me to share my ideas about the teaching of prayer. They said this was my "gift." I received very little critical feedback from colleagues, parents, or supervisors. I worried about becoming complacent. I include this information as part of my story not to brag, but to provide further support for the point I wish to make about teaching prayer in a liberal supplementary school setting. I knew my subject matter very well, had taught

prayer for 11 years and was considered successful. As I describe the challenges I encountered when teaching prayer, they should not be easily dismissed because I was inexperienced or incompetent. Moreover, if I encountered such serious problems, what about those teachers who are less experienced?

While my setting was similar to many smaller supplementary schools, I taught prayer very differently than the curricular materials investigated in the last chapter. I chose to teach both praying and prayer simultaneously by creating school prayer services in which we prayed and discussed the liturgy. In what follows, I describe both the context and my rationale.

### **The Lansing Jewish Community**

The Jewish community of Lansing, Michigan, counts about 425 families who are affiliated with one of the two local liberal congregations. In 1992, I moved to Lansing so that I could launch my doctoral studies in education while serving as the educational director of Congregation Kehillat Israel (affectionately known by its initials KI), the smaller of the two synagogues in Lansing, with approximately 125 member families. The congregation was unaffiliated in order to be as inclusive as possible. I was the educational director from 1992-1995. My job description focused on the school. I was not officially responsible for the ritual aspects of the congregation.

KI was founded about 30 years ago by academics, most of whom were knowledgeable about Judaism and liturgically sophisticated. The founders believed they did not need a rabbi or cantor for religious and ritual guidance. Rather, they wanted their religious leaders to challenge them intellectually. The

founders had a strong commitment to education. One of the main reasons they established the congregation was to maintain a supplementary school that would be engaging and stimulating for children of all ages. From its inception, KI was an egalitarian congregation, granting equal rights and obligations to men and women. (In 1970, this was not a mainstream idea; in fact, the first woman rabbi had not yet been ordained.) At the time of my arrival, the congregation was supporting a regularly scheduled Sabbath morning service, typically with between 20 and 25 adults in attendance. The school had 77 K-7th grade students. Rarely were children present for Saturday morning services. Students could be found in the building when classes were in session on Wednesday afternoon and Sunday morning from September through May.

In the 1970s, when the congregation was established, intermarried couples were rare, and many of the congregants were steeped in Hebrew and Jewish tradition. By 1992 when I moved to Lansing, close to a third of the children in the school were living in homes with one non-Jewish parent. As was the case nationally, growing numbers of congregants were not particularly knowledgeable about Judaism. Few families observed the Jewish dietary laws, or regularly celebrated the Sabbath or any but the major Jewish festivals. Many families were relying on the school to teach children about almost all aspects of Judaism.

At the time that I began working at KI, the parents in the school were frustrated with the kind of Jewish education that their children were receiving.

Rather than just complain, many parents volunteered to teach in the school.<sup>41</sup>

While these 15 parent teachers were not trained teachers, they were willing to devote some of their spare time to the school and to Jewish learning more broadly.

### **How Prayer Was Taught Before I Arrived**

Once I settled into my position as educational director, I quickly became dissatisfied with the way prayer was being taught in the school. This is not surprising. As an actively practicing Conservative Jew, I wished for the children of this congregation more opportunities to be deeply immersed in Jewish activity and tradition. Whenever possible, an effort was made to hold a prayer service during school time, but this was dependent upon a parent volunteer being available to teach during school hours. There was no regular opportunity for students to pray either as a class or as a school community.

At the time, *The New Siddur Program* (1992) was being used for teaching both prayer and Hebrew. As discussed in the last chapter, while this curriculum attempts to teach both Hebrew and prayer simultaneously, the strong emphasis is on Hebrew skills. I observed that KI students were not being introduced to the important ideas of the liturgy, nor were they being taught to think or struggle with the liturgy. God was not a part of the curriculum. Rather, the prayer curriculum focused strictly on skills acquisition. The teachers enacting this curriculum

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<sup>41</sup> The Avocational Teacher Project began six months before I arrived in Lansing. This project was generously funded by the Covenant Foundation and allowed the congregation to work with professional teacher educators to help parents learn about what it means to teach Judaism to their children. In addition, the school tried to create learning opportunities for parents who were

understood that their mandate was to help students learn to decode Hebrew. The liturgy was the means to an end. And the end was fluent Hebrew decoding.

Despite this emphasis, I observed that most students could barely decode Hebrew; only one or two could read Hebrew with some fluency. No one was able to translate more than a handful of words. During the first week of school in 1992, I visited the 7th grade classroom to see what prayers the students could recite. I selected a few core prayers, and was disturbed to see that the students could barely read them. Nor did they have any idea what they were about.

I do not offer these observations as a judgment on the teachers. The KI teachers were well-intentioned. They were working as supplementary school teachers because Judaism mattered a great deal to them and because they wanted to make a difference in children's lives. Like the teachers described in Shoem's (1989) ethnography, the KI instructors led very busy lives outside of KI; they lacked an in-depth subject matter knowledge, and were not necessarily observant Jews themselves. None of the teachers was committed to any kind of regular worship, none of the teachers observed the Sabbath or the dietary laws. Being Jewish was important to these teachers. And they did their best to encourage their students to love being Jewish. I felt it was unreasonable to ask them to be responsible for teaching prayer along with their other curricular responsibilities, for they had neither personal experiences nor educational background to teach prayer in the way I envisioned.

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often on a religious quest. While these experiences would have served as interesting sites for inquiry, they were not included in my analysis of my own teaching.



One option would have entailed creating and offering extensive professional development for the teachers. But I did not have the time to do the kind of teacher education necessary to enable the teachers to teach as I envisioned. I would have needed to meet with the teachers weekly for several hours to help them acquire the subject matter knowledge and the Hebrew skills necessary to develop ways of transmitting this knowledge to their students. The teachers, as noted above, were all part-time and had many different commitments. They could not devote time for these sessions and, even if they could, there was no money in the school budget to pay the teachers for any kind of ongoing in-service commitment. At most, I could have worked with the faculty once or twice at the beginning of each school year. That would not have enabled them to teach prayer in the way I envisioned. Complicating matters further is the fact that, although I had many opinions about what they needed to know, I was not an expert on professional development and adult learning, and this would have seriously compromised what I could offer them by way of a Jewish teacher education.

Another option might have involved increasing the time students spent in the school. However I also knew that we could not extend the school day or add an additional day of class. The children were immersed in a lively, busy environment with many other things they wanted and needed to do. There is no way the school families would have agreed to an additional school hours. Given these limitations, I decided that introducing a prayer service would allow me over time to transform the teaching of prayer in the school.

## **My Vision of What It Means to Study the Liturgy and Learn How to Pray**

As a Conservative rabbi, I believe that the Hebrew text, the traditional melodies and choreography, and the fixed nature of prayer are critical. I also believe that praying ought to be more than a series of robotic behaviors. Learning prayer means being trained in the mechanics and exposed to the intellectual material. But prayer also involves a personal expression or connection with God. As in many things, I draw my inspiration for learning from holy texts. Consider the first paragraph of the *Shema*:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day you shall take to heart. You shall diligently teach them to your children. You shall recite them at home and away, morning and evening. You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, they shall be a reminder above your eyes, and you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your homes and upon your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

In this text, we learn about the value of emotion (Love the Lord), intellect (You shall diligently teach them), and ritual (You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand). As a teacher, these three approaches guide me, for praying is at once intellectual and emotional, ritualistic and joyful. I rely on these assumptions when thinking about the teaching and learning of prayer. As I prepare for my teaching, I distinguish between learning prayers and learning how to pray. Both tasks are necessary and interdependent. In what follows I explain why this is so.

For Jews, part of learning how to pray means learning when to sit, stand, or bow. Generally, this is referred to as "synagogue etiquette" or "choreography." There is nothing particularly interesting or meaningful about knowing when or how to bow, when to stand or sit, when to close your eyes, or when you recite the

***Shema***. These actions are important to know because they allow one to feel like an insider when praying, and may allow the pray-er to feel more comfortable at services. By participating unthinkingly, one can get swept away in the moment. Most often, someone who is comfortable in synagogue knows when to perform these mechanical behaviors governed by rigid rules.

Furthermore, learning to pray also means becoming familiar with the Hebrew text and the proper melodies. Like the multiplication tables, these aspects of prayer can only be internalized through regular repetition. There is much, of course, to understand within those sacred texts, but an equally important part of knowing prayers involves being able to automatically recite them. Thus, learning how to pray requires repeated experience, practice and some rote memorization.

But learning how to pray also means becoming familiar with the differences among various kinds of services, understanding the basic structure of Jewish prayer. I believe my students need to know what the morning, afternoon, and evening services have in common and how they differ. They need to know, for example, which service includes the *Shema* and how the Sabbath *Amidah* compares to the weekday *Amidah*. This knowledge is often referred to as the "geography" of the prayer book. I believe that understanding the structure of Jewish worship is one of many keys for grasping how the formal liturgy works.

The mechanical or technical aspects of how to pray are extremely important, similar to why some mathematics educators want their students to memorize some basic procedures and facts. Without these important skills, further education can be difficult. If students do not know the mechanics of how to pray,

further exposure to prayer services can be problematic. That said, it is also important to note that we do not know—as Jewish educators—how much knowledge of these aspects of prayer must be mastered in order for Jews to engage in prayer in satisfying and meaningful ways.

In our efforts to help students feel comfortable during synagogue services, we encounter a dilemma. On the one hand, routines, acquired skills, or a memorized body of knowledge give one power, and their absence can just as easily be an obstacle for further learning. On the other hand, while the mechanical or technical aspects of how to pray are important, they can be devoid of any intellectual or spiritual content. It is unfortunate when skills become the goal, instead of the means, to becoming comfortable in synagogue. If we never go beyond the mechanical training, praying can be boring and meaningless. Potentially, praying can connect one to one's history and culture. However, if one only learns the routines and has no sense of what they represent, historically and culturally, then those routines—meant to link us to our past and help us form a Jewish identity—become random acts rather than purposeful actions.

Given my goal of using prayer to motivate spirituality and connectedness, this threat of ennui or tedium factored into how I taught at KI. I was committed to helping my students learn the meaning of the prayers that they were learning to recite by rote. Understanding the literary structure, historical origins, linguistic nuances, or theological rationale for a prayer allows students to think critically. Such topics make it possible to present learners with intellectually challenging ideas. Ultimately, praying involves being able to think intelligently through the

creative application of skills one has been trained to perform and concepts one has been taught.

For example, when teaching the *Shema*, I wanted students to know that, for centuries, Jews would close their eyes so that they could concentrate as they recited the watchword of their faith. I also thought this would allow them to be more comfortable in synagogue services if they automatically knew what to do. In addition, I wanted students to know that this prayer is so central to Jewish teaching that it is recited twice daily, once in the morning and again in the evening. Finally, I wanted students to know what central ideas could be found in the *Shema*. For example, I wanted students to know that the *Shema* articulates the Jews' commitment to one God; and that this commitment is binding all of the time, in and outside of the home, day and night. It was not enough for them to know how to recite the prayer and what to do. They also needed to know what it was about and when it became a part of daily worship.

Yet another assumption I make about prayer is that an intellectual discussion about the meaning of a prayer will not necessarily foster a spiritual experience. Rationality does not necessarily lead to faith. Thus, another dimension of learning prayer is finding personal meaning in the texts or in the experience of praying. In some ways, this is the most difficult aspect of learning prayer: Personal meaning is not under the control of educators or rabbis. It is very difficult to sense when someone has had a meaningful experience. Different variables affect different individuals in different ways at different times. For some,

being familiar with the mechanics and being engaged intellectually may lead one to personal connection with the text. For others, it will not.

As a teacher, my job is to make it possible for students to find personal connections with the text and to have meaningful communal prayer experiences. This means creating an environment where they might be able to have a meaningful moment of prayer, or where they might feel as though they had just spoken to God. As a result, I tried to create an atmosphere in the sanctuary that would be different from a formal classroom. I did not take attendance, nor were students reminded to get a prayer book or to follow along on the right page. I never insisted that they participate in services and I also never disciplined students because of their behavior. I was trying to create an experience that was significantly different from their formal classroom experience. I used as my guide the norms of a service. Congregants are not told to be quiet, nor are they disciplined due to their behavior. They are free to do as they want, reading the prayer book or not, reciting the prayers or not.

This focus on the teaching of prayer through praying was based on my own experiences with liturgy and praying. In what follows, I explain my own experiences with learning how to pray, for they clearly affected my work in Lansing.

### **My Experiences with Prayer and Liturgy**

The prayer book is my favorite text. I pray daily and seek opportunities to study its myriad levels. This was not always the case. Until 1984, I knew little about the prayer book. Though raised in a Conservative home, a product of a

Jewish day-school education, and a regular synagogue attendee, I was unfamiliar with the central ideas embodied in the prayer book. No one had ever taught me the meaning of the prayers or the rationale for the set liturgy. I knew nothing of its ideas or history and I was unfamiliar with basic synagogue etiquette. Despite 12 years spent in Jewish schools, I was totally dependent on the rabbi leading services to tell me when and how to pray. I was never taught how to pray or how to navigate my way through a prayer book. I never studied the liturgy and I did not understand the structure of a service or basic purposes of worship. I stopped going to synagogue because I hated feeling so inadequate and my dependence on the rabbi was frustrating. The English responsive readings failed to move me, and while I often wanted to pray at home, I did not know how to do so. Dewey (1938) might argue that I had had many "mis-educative" experiences, for "any experience that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience" is "mis-educative" (p. 25). I had been to synagogue all my life, attended Jewish schools, and still I felt inept and uncomfortable in the synagogue even though I wanted to be there.

In my mid-20s, I was caught in a spiritual tug of war. I wanted to be in synagogue but I was frustrated with my ignorance. During the *Rosh Hashanah*<sup>42</sup> services of 1984, I experienced a calling. I watched the young associate rabbi lead services. As he carefully explained the service, I realized he was answering questions I had never thought to ask. Envious, I wanted to know everything he

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<sup>42</sup> *Rosh Hashanah* is the Jewish New Year, celebrated in the fall.

knew. I wanted to know about the liturgy and about synagogue etiquette. I wanted to feel as if I belonged.

For the next couple of years I began studying prayer seriously. I mastered the Hebrew texts, learned about the history and meaning of some important prayers, and began to pray on a more regular basis. I studied with the rabbi of my synagogue. I traveled to Israel, and I committed myself to daily prayer, eventually learning to love communal worship. I felt more at ease and was even able to pray by myself at home. I also realized how much more I wanted to learn about Judaism. Knowing that my questions were too important to set aside, I applied to rabbinical school hoping to receive an in-depth and thorough education. It was there that I fell in love with the prayer book. Whether studying the texts through historical, literary, or philosophical lenses, I was always engaged. The more I studied, the more I needed to pray. Prayer became an important part of my daily routine.

My story is an unusual one. I was fortunate enough to encounter a Conservative rabbi interested in teaching traditional Jewish prayer. His lessons about prayer launched me on a spiritual and intellectual journey to rabbinical school. However, I know that many American Jews struggle with the traditional prayers, feel alienated, and never find their way to a comfortable spot for themselves. They crave spirituality and feel that Judaism offers them nothing (Schwartz, 2000). As a young and idealistic Jewish educator, I wanted my students to have an appreciation for Jewish prayer and for the traditional liturgy. I had lofty goals for the teaching of prayer grounded in my personal experience of



experiencing my religious awakening through my own deepening understanding of prayer and ease with praying. I wanted to insure that students in the KI school did not have the same "mis-educative" experiences I had.

### **A Typical Sunday Morning Service at Kehillat Israel**

My vision for teaching prayer was ambitious. In just 45 minutes per week, I wanted to teach students how to pray and what the liturgy means. Given what I knew about the teachers' religious orientation and educational background, I believed that it would be unfair of me to ask the teachers to teach prayer the way I thought it needed to be taught. The teachers themselves did not know the liturgy well enough to teach students how to pray, and most had never studied the liturgy, so they knew very little about its history or meaning.

I also recognized that it would be impossible for me as the educational director of the school to teach weekly in all seven classes, so I decided to teach prayer during the school day within a short service for students in the second through seventh grades. It was important to me that students pray regularly. I assumed that regular recitation of the Hebrew prayers would enable students to learn how to pray. So, on both Wednesday afternoon and Sunday morning, approximately 20-25 minutes were devoted to communal worship for students.

There are several reasons why I held one service. As a member of the congregation, I knew that most of the students in the school never had an opportunity to experience Jewish prayer. They did not come to the synagogue on a routine basis and their parents did not pray regularly at home. Intuitively, I felt that I needed to create prayer experiences for the students, especially if the

prayers students were learning in Hebrew class were to be at all meaningful.

Dewey (1938) explains:

What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue. (p. 44)

Dewey's point is that good experiences allow students to take what they learn in one context and apply it to another. Knowing that students were studying certain prayers in their Hebrew classes, I wanted to give them an opportunity to practice reciting the prayers in an authentic service. I also wanted to give students an opportunity to learn more about what the liturgy was saying. My intuition was that this would have an impact on how they experienced prayer in other settings.

In addition to providing experiences that would interact with the students' academic classes, I also wanted to create an ongoing school activity that would develop over time. Again, Dewey (1938) helps articulate my motives and reasoning:

Different situations succeed one another, but because of the principle of continuity something is carried over from the earlier to the later ones. As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world. (p. 44)

As I set out to develop meaningful continuous experiences, I decided that I wanted opportunities for meaningful prayer to be a continuous part of students' KI experience. Dewey (1938), in describing continuity, explains "that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35). Thus, we

would have regular services, and I would see to it that, while the core of the service would be the same, the service would be modified as students learned important ideas and acquired important synagogue skills. In this way, I could situate the students' praying both in the contemporary activities in the synagogue, as well as in the history of Jewish prayer recounted in Chapter 2.

On a more practical level, I knew that I would be too busy to lead two or three different services each time school was in session. In addition, I wanted students in the second to seventh graders to pray together so that we would have a critical mass, something I believed would shape our capacity to pray together.<sup>43</sup> My previous experience, both as a leader and a participant, was that there is power in numbers. I was certain that having services with 10 or 12 students would not have worked. Even though Jewish tradition suggests that 10 is the minimum number required for a public service,<sup>44</sup> I felt that if our singing of the Hebrew prayers was to sound strong and powerful, we needed many grades to pray together. I also believed that it was important for the younger and older students to join together to feel connected to a larger community. Having all the students in the school praying together would hopefully enable me to create such an atmosphere.

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<sup>43</sup> Students in the kindergarten and first grades were only in school once a week. They were not included in this service because they did not know Hebrew and they would have only participated in Sunday morning services.

<sup>44</sup> A *minyan* is composed of ten individuals over the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Jewish tradition requires a *minyan* for public worship. Although it is permissible to pray alone, it is not permitted to recite certain prayers without a *minyan*. Liberal Jews almost always include women as part of a *minyan*. Orthodox tradition requires ten men to be present.

I decided that the best way for me to teach both prayers and praying was to introduce one regular service into the school routine. Communal prayer is an integral part of Jewish life. It made sense to me for students to dedicate time each day to prayer, and I was certain that I would be able to teach students, teachers, and any interested parents both about the prayers and how to pray.

In addition to the students and teachers, nearly all of the parents who happened to be present in the building joined us in the sanctuary. Parents were not required to participate, but they seemed curious about our service. Some wanted to see their children learning to pray. Several parents told me that they enjoyed coming to services because they liked to learn about the prayers. Others were pleased to have an opportunity to acquire prayer skills. Many of the parents participating in the Avocational Teacher Project also chose to join their students for services.

Our discussions of the prayers, interspersed throughout the service, were usually not longer than five or seven minutes. Because our services were held in a sanctuary, there was no chalkboard, desks, or other classroom paraphernalia. I did not want students to think about services as another subject to be learned. Rather, I wanted them to be able to set aside time each day that they came to religious school just for prayer. I also wanted them to think about their time in the sanctuary as sacred time in a sacred space. There they could sing Hebrew prayers or listen to others singing Hebrew prayers. They could participate in a discussion about the liturgy, or they could sit quietly and listen to others discuss the liturgy. They could sit next to their friends and even whisper to someone

during the service. They could, in effect, act like adults do in services. As a result, I never cancelled services. I did not want to even suggest that prayer was optional. I wanted students to think of structured prayer as a regular and integral part of the religious school day.

Dewey (1902) offers an important insight for me as I try and understanding the challenges I encountered teaching prayer at KI. He writes:

The child lives in a somewhat narrow world of personal contacts. Things hardly come within his experience unless they touch, intimately and obviously, his own well-being, or that of his family and friends. His world is a world of persons with their personal interests, rather than a realm of facts and laws. Not truth, in the sense of conformity to external fact, but affection and sympathy, is its keynote. As against this, the course of study in the school presents material stretching back indefinitely in time, and extending outward indefinitely into space. The child is taken out of his familiar physical environment, hardly more than a square mile or so in area, into the wide world—yes, and even to the bounds of the solar system. His little span of personal memory and tradition is overlaid with the long centuries of the history of all peoples. (p. 183)

Dewey's point is that there are often significant differences between the child's world and the school's world. The child's world is limited or narrow in some ways and the school offers the student access to the entire universe. Dewey frames the relationship between the school curriculum and the child's life in a very useful way. I am, and continue to be tempted, to think that the gap between the subject matter (traditional Judaism) and my students' lives is extensive and unique to Jewish education. In fact, I argued in Chapter 3 that the waning practices of Jewish families contributed to the challenges of teaching prayer in a liberal supplementary school. While I still believe that this gap is a significant challenge to Jewish educators, a close reading of Dewey suggests

that this gap allows for new opportunities or ways of thinking about teaching.

Dewey explains:

Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child's experience; cease thinking of the child's experience as also something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital; and we realize that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction. It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies. (p. 189)

Dewey is suggesting that the educator needs to recognize the educational opportunities that await the student whose life will interact with the school curriculum. The purpose of schooling is to expand the student's worldview and extant experience, not to write on the tabula rasa of the naïve learner.

I would be misrepresenting myself if I wrote that I always felt that the gap between the home and school was an opportunity for new and exciting learning. When working at KI, I thought a lot about the challenges, problems, and concerns as opposed to the opportunities, advantageous circumstances or possible portals. I sometimes assumed that the problem was one of a deficit: These students lacked important experience and knowledge. But I also believed that the purpose of the school was to provide Jewish experiences and learning opportunities that the students would not encounter anywhere else.

I suggested to school families that my job was to expose students to new rituals and to prepare them for their future encounters with Judaism. I explained my philosophy of education at school board meetings, in the monthly synagogue bulletin, and in a weekly school newsletter for parents. I explained that in my

opinion if students were to become comfortable praying, they needed to have experiences praying. While a few parents were at first concerned about devoting too much time to prayer, most were supportive of my efforts.

Each week the services were the same. I always led the service, wearing the traditional garments worn during services. I covered my head with a knitted head-covering known as a *kippah*<sup>45</sup>, wore a *tallit*<sup>46</sup> (prayer shawl), and *tefillin*.<sup>47</sup> I wore these garments because they were integral to my daily worship. I wanted our experience to be authentic. I also wanted the students to become familiar with the *tallit* and *tefillin*. Even though they were not requirements for participation in the adult services at KI, I still believed it was important for students to know about these garments, for that is part of becoming well-informed literate Jews.

Upon entering the sanctuary, students began chanting a Hebrew song or *nigun*<sup>48</sup> and sat with their teacher(s), classmates, and parents. After some introductory prayers, I asked students to recall some information we had already

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<sup>45</sup> The *kippah* is a universally recognized symbol of Jewish identity. *Kippot* (plural of *kippah*) can be made of cloth, or crocheted wool, or leather. In the Conservative synagogue Jewish men are required to wear *kippot* at all times. Many Conservative women wear *kippot* to indicate their religious equality, as well as their reverence for God. Although the early Reform Movement frowned upon the wearing of *kippot*, some Reform men and women now wear them in synagogue and at religious ceremonies. This is an optional practice within the movement.

<sup>46</sup> The *tallit* is the traditional prayer shawl worn after the age of 13. Ritual fringes, called *tzitzit*, are attached to each of the four corners of the *tallit* in accordance with biblical law, so that the wearer will look at the fringes and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them. Traditional Jewish men wear a *tallit* at all morning services. Although the early Reform Movement frowned upon the wearing of *tallit*, some Reform men and women now wear them in synagogue. All Jewish men are required to wear a *tallit* in a Conservative congregation. Many Conservative women wear a *tallit*.

<sup>47</sup> *Tefillin* (phylacteries) are two black leather boxes containing four biblical passages that are bound by black leather straps to the forehead and left arm. The commandment to wear *tefillin* dates back to the Bible: "It shall be a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand the Lord freed us from Egypt." Traditionally, *tefillin* have been worn only by men in the weekday morning service. In modern times, many Conservative women have begun to wear *tefillin*. It is most unusual to see men or women in a Reform congregation wearing *tefillin*.

learned, sometimes introducing new topics for discussion. My questions varied. I wanted my students to learn the "geography" of the prayer book, which prayers required a *minyan*, and how certain Hebrew words might be translated into English. So I asked questions that, according to my interpretation of Jewish tradition, had correct and incorrect answers. According to Jewish tradition, how many people do you need for a *minyan*? How old do you have to be to be counted in a *minyan*? Are you allowed to recite the *Shema* without a *minyan*? Each time I paused to ask such questions there was a break in our service.

On a practical level, students had been singing aloud for about 10 minutes and I wanted to give them a chance to catch their breath and rest for a few minutes. In addition, teaching was an important part of the service. I felt it was important to interrupt and ask students questions about Jewish prayer. The first time I interrupted our service, I asked questions that were entirely factual; that is, in my opinion, there were always correct or incorrect answers. Most of the time, the younger students answered these questions, I was sometimes touched to see how older students often prompted the younger students. While we never said it explicitly, I think the older students understood that the questions I asked at this point in the service were "too easy or juvenile" for them. It seemed to me that the older students understood that the younger children were learning and needed these kinds of questions to participate in our service. Meanwhile, the older students sat attentively, offered encouraging facial expressions, and never

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<sup>48</sup> A *nigun* is a melody with no words.



laughed or ridiculed the younger children. They also never exhibited signs of boredom or annoyance for going over the same material week after week.<sup>49</sup>

After about 3 to 5 minutes devoted to these kinds of questions and answers, we continued with the service. We continued reciting the prayers aloud for about 10 minutes or so. I tried to interrupt the service in a timely fashion, when students would most likely need a break from reciting the prayers aloud and also when there was a natural break in the liturgy. At the same time, I wanted to maintain the natural momentum of the service, and so I often found myself walking a fine line between creating a spiritual environment as the rabbi and responding to pedagogical urges I felt as a teacher.

With a second set of questions, I tried not to focus on just the factual aspects of Jewish prayer, for while I value factual knowledge and skill, I also wanted my students to begin thinking critically. So I introduced serious prayer-related issues: Is it better to pray in English or Hebrew? How do we know whether prayer is effective? What is effective prayer? Should we include the matriarchs in the *Amidah*?<sup>50</sup> These are very challenging questions with which many adults grapple. None of these questions has a correct answer. Typically, we spent about seven or eight minutes on this second set of questions. Often we discussed the same topic for several weeks at a time. I would remind students what we had been discussing and then I would try and further our discussion.

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<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that this inquiry relied solely on the data I could collect as teacher and participant, thus I do not have data on the students' or other participants' experiences during these services.

<sup>50</sup> The traditional liturgy addresses God as the God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob. In certain Reform and Conservative communities, prayers have changed the liturgy to address

Then we would recite the concluding prayers, following those with brief announcements. At the conclusion of the service, students were dismissed by grade.

Over time, the students' chanting became stronger. The Hebrew words were more discernable and it was evident that many were more at ease with the prayer book and with the routine. The feedback I received from parents, teachers, and students was always encouraging. We were all pleased with how easily students seemed to be acquiring prayer skills. Students were well-behaved and I never heard complaints about having to come to services on Wednesday and Sunday. Our Wednesday afternoon service was at the end of the day. Parents rarely picked their children up early from school on Wednesdays. Instead, they parked their cars and they often came inside the building so that they too could participate in the school service. Another positive outcome of our service was the sense of community that developed as the younger children looked up to the older children and they in turn looked after the younger children in the school. I always enjoyed watching the 6th and 7th graders interact with the younger students.

There was a growing sense among congregants (even those who had no connection with the school) that children were, for the first time in recent Kl history, more comfortable with prayer and praying. Such things are hard to measure, for they appear in subtle ways. It appeared that students were becoming more comfortable in synagogue services. They knew how to find their

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God as the God of Abraham, God of Sarah, God of Isaac, God of Rebecca, God of Jacob, God of Rachel and God of Leah.

place in the school prayer book and were able to participate in the adult services with more ease. At Kehillat Israel, most of the students' *Bnai Mitzvah* (plural of Bar or Bat Mitzvah) ceremonies are in the spring, after the long Michigan winter has ended. That first year, it was evident by the students' performance at their Bar/Bat Mitzvah that they were more comfortable with the prayers. Students led parts of the service that in the past they had never done before. Many of us believed that the students acquired good prayer skills because they were having an opportunity to pray together regularly.

From the outset, my goal was to teach both prayers and praying. At the time, I was convinced that I had found a way to do both. I felt very successful and would have gladly gone to professional conferences to share my success story with others. I still believe that I was effective. And, if I were to return to KI, I would still establish a school service. But I now understand that there were some trade-offs. And I would do some things differently, in part, because I understand these services better having inquired into my own practice.

After having taught for 2 1/2 years at KI, I decided to videotape my Sunday morning teaching. I wanted to study and understand the challenges of teaching prayer in a liberal supplementary school. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe and discuss particular challenges associated with my teaching of prayer that surfaced when I analyzed those tapes. The tapes were made between January and May 1995. In 2001 and 2002, I look at them in a new light, with many questions and concerns that I did not have then.

## **Method of Analysis**

I began examining the videotapes just a few months after they were made. Initially, I was not exactly sure what to look for as I watched the them. Russell Baker (1987) keenly described the problem of having too much information when trying to write about your own experiences. "The biographer's problem is that he never knows enough. The autobiographer's problem is that he knows too much" (p. 49). I decided that my first challenge was to determine which instances would be worthy of close examination. I did not have any formal criteria. I watched tapes, not knowing what to look for. Frustrated, I put the tapes away and came back to them more than a year later.

As I watched the videotapes for the second time in 1996, I took notes on the structure of each service, looked for patterns of behavior, and tracked the topics that were covered. It is typical in qualitative research to search for themes or categories. In this second viewing of the videotapes, I made verbatim transcripts of five lessons. I made them myself because I thought it would allow me to become even more familiar with my data, and I wanted to re-immense myself in the experiences, but this time from the back of the room. I chose particular lessons to transcribe because they were typical of my teaching. Also, they could be examined as individual pieces or as a unit; they were, in a way, detachable from that which went before and after. This allowed me to share the tapes with others, and ask for commentary and reflection.

In 1996 as I examined the videotapes three categories emerged (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982). One had to do with the kinds of questions that were entertained during the service. Were they factual or interpretive? Did the students ever ask

questions of me? I thought it was important to think about when and how often students were driving the direction of our discussion. The second category had to do with the age-range of the learners. Watching the videotapes made me aware of a tension that existed as I tried to teach 2nd and 7th graders simultaneously. Finally, the third category had to do with time constraints. I noticed that I was always rushing. It seemed to me that I was always in a hurry.

Initially I thought my analysis could be organized around these three categories: student questions, age-range of learners, and time constraints. But the more I thought about the issues, I was persuaded there were other lenses through which to examine my teaching.

In the summer of 2001, six years after the videotapes were first made, I came back to them for a third time. This time, I examined the notes and observations I had already made. I invited a colleague to watch a few of the tapes with me, because I thought her questions might allow me to see the tapes in a new light.

The previous two times I had examined the videotapes, I felt as though I was watching myself. I was close to the teaching moments. I remembered a lot of what had happened and felt as though I needed to defend or perhaps further explain the teaching in the tapes. This third time was different. I was a researcher examining data. The tapes were an artifact, in many ways, no different than the curricula I investigated. The situation was simultaneously familiar and distant. At first, I feared that this would compromise my research. But ultimately, I believe it freed me to ask questions and think about my teaching in new ways.

On a personal note, there were some major differences in my life that probably informed my analysis of the data. When I moved from Lansing, I stopped working in a supplementary school. My work in Kansas City is with adults. So I rarely have the opportunity to be around supplementary schools. At the same time, I have become a day school parent. My oldest daughter has been attending the local Jewish day school for three years. I am amazed at how comfortable she is with the formal liturgy. She knows the prayer book quite well and has acquired excellent prayer skills. I am convinced that she would never have acquired such excellent prayer skills were she to be a student in a supplementary school. I explain this here because I think it is possible that my experiences as a mother may have informed how I analyzed my teaching experiences at the KI. We cannot escape our own values and beliefs as scholars. Nonetheless, it is important for us to make those public so that readers may judge the validity of our assertions.

It was in the summer of 2001, when I revisited the data that I created new lenses for analyzing my teaching experiences. One had to do with my struggling to understand my role as rabbi. There were instances in the videotapes that alerted me to a tension between the congregation's and my ideological orientation. I had made many notes to myself on this issue over the years that I worked at KI and these notes provided an important additional data source.

The other lens concerned teaching prayers in the midst of a traditional service. The limitations of the synagogue service led to pedagogical

compromises. In what follows, I describe how teaching prayers in the midst of our praying together led—I will argue—to a compromised pedagogy.

After closely examining my practice, I became aware that I brought many competing aims to my work at KI. The resolution of their dissonance was neither neat nor simple. I was at once committed to creating an authentic prayer service and to teaching students in the school some of the significant and interesting ideas found in the liturgy.

### **Teaching Prayer and Praying Simultaneously Leads to Compromised Pedagogy**

As I explained earlier in the chapter, when I organized the service, I felt we needed a critical mass for an authentic experience of communal worship. Yet having the critical mass for the service made it nearly impossible for me to attend to all 60 students and present the subject matter in an age-appropriate manner. Because we were not in a conventional classroom, I did not have the opportunity to vary my pedagogy. I asked questions, offered explanations, and directed our discussions, but we did not have the time for small group work nor did students do any kind of written assignment. (There are, of course, other instructional strategies more adaptable to the service setting that I did not use, for example, giving students an opportunity to speak with their neighbors before participating in the large group discussion.)

Another issue that became evident to me had to do with my deep commitment to a regular fixed service. I wanted students to have authentic prayer experiences. So I felt unable to respond to students' questions in ways I might have were I teaching in classroom. This meant that sometimes I

marginalized my desire for things to be meaningful, in order for the service to be authentic. If time was short, for instance, the need to finish the service overruled my commitment to responding to student questions and comments. In what follows I describe the pedagogical limitations that were a direct result of my teaching in the midst of a school service. I structure the analysis around two topics that I noticed as I reviewed the video: a mixed-age student population, and student-generated questions. As I examine each of these, I reflect on underlying issues that might have shaped my teaching. At the end of the chapter, I bring those underlying, cross-cutting problems to centerstage and reflect on what I have learned about them through reflecting on my own teaching.

### **60 Students between 2nd and 7th Grades Creates Pedagogical Problems**

In the middle of my third year teaching prayer at KI, I decided to try teaching the second blessing of the *Amidah*, known as *g'vurot* (God's might) or *m'chaye mateem* (gives life to the dead).

Your might, O Lord is boundless. You give life to the dead; great is Your saving power. Your loving kindness sustains the living, Your great mercies give life to the dead. You support the falling, heal the ailing, free the fettered. You keep Your faith with those who sleep in the dust. Whose power can compare with Yours? You are the master of life and death and deliverance. Faithful are You in giving life to the dead. Praise are You, Lord, Master of life and death.  
(Harlow, 1985, p. 106)

Among the many powers attributed to God, the traditional text of this blessing clearly states that God gives life to the dead. There were many reasons why I decided to teach the *g'vurot* blessing. First, the blessing is central to the traditional liturgy. Every time students are in services, they recite it. In almost all synagogues, it is a text that is traditionally sung aloud (as opposed to a text that



is said silently or often skipped). At Kehillat Israel, my students sang this blessing aloud each time we prayed together in school and every time they came to synagogue services. As a result, they encountered the text regularly and became familiar with the Hebrew words. For this reason, I felt it was necessary to teach the meaning of the blessing. Also, almost all of the teaching I had done was about the geography of the service, the meaning of certain key Hebrew words, and the choreography of worship. I had not taught a prayer that I considered to be theologically challenging. I thought it would be good to try something new.

What I did not consider was how difficult the ideas of this prayer would be to grasp. I taught the blessing on five consecutive Sunday mornings. Students easily learned "facts": when the blessing was recited and how one is to stand while reciting the blessing. They also learned the Hebrew phrase *m'chaye mateem* literally means God gives life to the dead.

In reviewing the five videotapes, I noticed a pattern. On each of the Sunday mornings that we discussed this lesson, I explained that some Jews interpret the text literally, meaning that God literally resurrects the dead. I noticed that during discussions of this blessing I never explained what I meant by the phrase "God gives life to the dead." Each time we began a discussion of the blessing, I always began with an explanation that now seems very vague:

So the words *m'chaye mateem* are very hard words for us. Literally, they mean, God gives life to the dead. That is what those words mean. *M'chaye* is gives life. *Mateem* is dead. That's what the paragraph is saying. (Transcript February 26, 1995)

That's what it literally means. God gives life to the dead. And I said to you last time, that we were going to work hard to try and figure out what does that mean. So there are some people who believe that literally God some how gives life to people who aren't alive

anymore. That in some way or another at some time something happens. (Transcript, March 5, 1995)

Gives life to the dead, a kind of funny thing we have to begin to understand. (Transcript, March 19, 1995)

God gives life to the dead. Which is kind of a tough idea for us to think about. (Transcript, March 26, 1995)

Given how hazy my explanations were, it is hard to imagine that any child of any age understood what I was saying. I suspect that the younger students were clueless. Piaget helps us think about how children perceive the world around them at different ages; why they ask questions and interpret information in ways that they do. Describing children between the ages of 7 to 11, Piaget (1960, 1964) claims that children rely on concrete objects or representations to guide them in their thinking. They can serialize, extend, subdivide, differentiate, or combine existing structures into new relationships or groupings. According to Piaget, children's thoughts are still limited to their concrete experiences. According to Piagetian theory, then, children are not yet capable of dealing with abstractions such as billions of years that are logically possible but cannot be conceived in concrete realistic terms. If the younger children could not understand abstractions such as billions of years, I suspect that they could not truly grasp the meaning of the phrase "gives life to the dead."<sup>51</sup>

As I taught in the service, I explained that some people say the blessing in Hebrew but do some mental editing. Holtz (1993) calls the process by which individuals simply tune out the noise of those phrases that do not touch them or

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<sup>51</sup> There has, as the reader no doubt knows, been lively debate about the validity of Piaget's assertions concerning the children's capacities to reason abstractly at young ages. While I do not

that they disagree with “mental editing.” In this way, pray-ers create a kind of “countertext” to the liturgy by mentally adjusting the literal content of what is being recited to conform to their own beliefs and values.

Over the five weeks, I taught various ways the traditional blessing has been mentally edited. For example, some claim that the phrase is not referring to bodily resurrection but to how the living keep the memory of the dead alive. I said:

When somebody has actually died, we have memories, pictures, and we talk about that person. That is another way we keep somebody who is not with us alive. (Transcript, March 26, 1995)

Meanwhile, I also introduced another very different interpretation:

Another interpretation is actually from the Talmud. (Michael and Rafi were misbehaving and the tape shows my looking at them and asking them to sit quietly and not disrupt the service.) That interpretation said that this *bracha* used to be said when you didn't see someone who you knew for 30 days. ... people would say this *bracha*—*Baruch Atah Adonai M'chaye HaMateem* when they hadn't seen somebody for at least 30 days. Because it was as if that person wasn't alive. Because the idea was that [when a person was] out of sight it is as if the person wasn't alive anymore. (Transcript, March 5, 1995)

Still another way to interpret the phrase is to recite the blessing after a person has recovered from a serious illness. “If somebody is really really sick. And then all of the sudden they get better, it is as if God gives life to the dead” (Transcript, March 26, 1995). Finally, I taught that some Jews are so bothered by the traditional liturgy that they change the text to praise God who creates everything:

There are other people who do something different with the text. Do you remember the change we talked about? (Nancy, a second grader, raised her hand and answered some people say *m'chaye*

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go into those debates here, i recognize that my questions about the students' capacities to think about these abstractions have the status of conjectures here, not substantiated claims.

*hakol*) I continued saying God gives life to everything. Some people change the text and say God gives life to everything. (Transcript April 9, 1995)

In reviewing the lessons about *m'chaye mateem*, I noticed things I was unaware of while teaching. For example, no student ever asked what I meant by the phrase "gives life to the dead." In contrast, at least four of the parents and/or teachers asked me questions in the hallway, or e-mailed me asking for more information about what I meant by the phrase "gives life to the dead." In my notes, I wrote about Steve<sup>52</sup>, who explained that he thought "resurrection was a Christian idea, since Jesus was supposed to have been resurrected. I never heard resurrection in a Jewish context, he said" (Journal, March 6, 1995). The adults' follow-up questions suggest that the material I was teaching was of interest to them. The stark difference—high levels of interest on the part of parents, and unusual silence on the part of students—makes me wonder about what sense students were making of my lessons.

When I examined the tapes, I noticed that younger students who were usually eager to participate in our discussions were noticeably quiet when speaking about this blessing. For example, Rebecca always had her hand in the air. She sat perched on the edge of her seat, always with a big grin, always interested in learning more about the prayers. When I examined the *m'chaye mateem* lessons, however, I saw her sitting with a glazed look on her face. She did not participate in any of the discussions about this blessing. Furthermore, she looks bored or confused. Similarly, Greg was usually the kind of boy who always asked

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<sup>52</sup> All student names are pseudonyms.

questions, and tried to be involved in any discussion that I led. In the *m'chaye mateem* discussions, Greg too was uncharacteristically silent. In some instances, he talks to another boy in the class, at other moments, he appears to be daydreaming.

While older students were willing to answer my questions, I noted they never initiated questions about the blessing. Their behavior in these lessons was different than their behavior in other lessons, for the older students often initiated questions and challenged me to clarify what I was presenting. For example, when talking about changing the traditional liturgy, Natalie, a 7th grade girl, asked if it was controversial to change the prayers. Similarly, David often asked hard but important questions like, "Why would you say a prayer if you don't believe what it says?"

Another clue that the way I presented this blessing was not effective involves changes in student behavior. In the three years I taught prayer during services at KI, students were almost always well-behaved. Rarely, did I have to ask students to stop talking or to listen more closely. I noticed, however, that during a *m'chaye mateem* lesson, I asked Michael and Rafi to pay closer attention to our discussion. That was very unusual, especially for those boys, who usually sat quietly and often participated in our discussions.

Further, as I reviewed the tapes, I noticed that students were able to regurgitate facts about the blessing, such as when it appears, how many times the words *m'chaye mateem* appear in the blessing, when the blessing is recited, or how others might interpret the blessing. Interestingly, nobody ever asked,

**"What does it mean to 'give life to the dead?'" Since I emphasized the fact that some might interpret the blessing literally, I would have expected someone to ask me what that means. But not one student asked me to clarify my explanation or refine the ideas I was presenting. Nobody questioned how we know this, or what it means to believe that God gives life to the dead. I think this blessing, as I presented it, was so difficult to understand that neither the older nor the younger students were able to grasp the ideas. Alternatively, my pedagogical content knowledge of how to connect students to this idea was limited. In retrospect, I cannot determine why this shift occurred in our praying community. All I know is that they asked no questions of me. As a result, the younger students were uncharacteristically quiet, and the older students redirected the discussion.**

**The older students suggested new or different ways of interpreting the blessing. For example, during our third lesson about this blessing, Arianna, a 7th grader suggested: "Well, I have this idea that when someone dies maybe that their memories still live. So, that in a way you can remember them" (Transcript, March 5, 1995). Michael, another 7th grader, also struggled with the blessing's meaning. He thought that perhaps "God maybe makes people who aren't religious become more religious" (Transcript, March 5, 1995). Both Arianna and Michael understood the blessing to be about God giving individuals something they do not have. In Arianna's case, she was thinking about what happens after you die. As she explained that morning, the main idea of the blessing could be that death is not the end. Through our memories, the dead are revived, living on in the hearts and minds of the living. Michael understood the blessing differently.**

I think he was suggesting that God was powerful enough to make an irreligious person become more religious; God is so omnipotent that God has the ability to control the individual's religious orientation. While neither student discussed the interpretations I had already taught, both Arianna and Michael were trying to make meaning for themselves.

Trying to teach the *g'vurot* blessing is difficult in the best of circumstances. My problems were exacerbated because I was teaching students between 2nd and 7th grades. As I examined my journal, it became clear to me that I was imprecise about my goals for this discussion. In general, when I prepare to teach, I try to be very specific, taking into account whom the learner is and what I want them to learn and be able to do at the conclusion of a lesson. The notes that I made to myself after teaching on Sunday February 26, 1995 are rather vague:

At this point, I had a hard time. I think I couldn't figure out which ideas, I had learned about the blessing were important to teach. ... The students didn't get it and I had a really hard time explaining myself. I am not going to go back to this point. The origins of this blessing are fascinating, but not for my educational aims. ... We have been working on the idea of multiple voices within the tradition, I think that this is the way to understand the blessing. We need to talk about how different people might interpret the words in the blessing. I think I can present these ideas so that the students can relate to some ideas, if not others. (Journal entry February 26, 1995)

Notice I never specified which group of students I was intending to teach. It is almost as if I was throwing darts with no sense of where the board was located. Was my lesson for the younger children or the older students? Had I considered alternative ways to approach teaching the blessing? How did I come up with my ideas of how to teach this? Were there alternatives I could have considered? It is hard to know from my journal entry.

In addition to being unfocussed about who I was teaching, the sanctuary as the background to the lesson was problematic. I taught *g'vurot* on five Sunday mornings, spending between 7 and 12 minutes teaching the blessing each time. I began each discussion by reviewing what the words *m'chaye mateem* mean, how many times they appear in the blessing, and any information about the blessing that we had previously covered. Next I introduced some new information, for example, another way of interpreting the blessing. I always felt that I could not devote more time to the material because I wanted to make sure that we chanted a complete service. It was very important to me that students experience an authentic service. While I abbreviated the service somewhat, I did not want to change the service format. I thought that part of their prayer experiences should be chanting the same prayers each time we gathered. But I understand now how my commitment to services was at odds with my desire to teach some rather complicated liturgy.

### **Student-Generated Questions Not Addressed**

Students often raised questions about the liturgy or about Jewish traditions and practices. Many of their questions were interesting and worth pursuing. But students did not get the attention they might have received had I been teaching a smaller group of students or had I not felt so pressured to get through the service. Addressing the needs of 60 learners while being the person responsible for leading services led me to dismiss individual questions in ways I never would have done were I in a classroom with fewer students and without the commitment to leading a service. Furthermore, in addition to the constraints of



the setting, as principal of the school, I did not have time to follow-up with students individually after services. Parents, teachers, and the synagogue administrator needed my attention. And I was never able to focus my attention on the students' questions about prayer once services were over. If I did not respond to individual questions during services, no other opportunities for responding were available. This press to attend to multiple actors and events is typical of the work of school principals. For instance, many school principals often worry that they do not have the time or the space to be intellectual leaders in their schools.

Noteworthy was the fact that most of our discussions were teacher-directed: I developed a set of questions on topics that I deemed significant. Students tended to be responsive to my questions. However, there were several instances when students did initiate questions that I consistently dismissed. In my journal, I explained that I did this *not* because I thought that the questions were irrelevant or unimportant, but rather because I was always concerning myself with completing the services. If I wanted to teach prayers within the context of a service, I did not have a lot of time for discussion. And many of the students' questions necessitated lengthy responses. Let us consider several instances.

One question that several students continually asked was: "But why don't we do p. 20?" Page 20 was the second paragraph of the *Shema*. We regularly recited the first paragraph, page 19, and the third paragraph, page 21, aloud. We always skipped page 20:

If you will earnestly heed the commandments that I give you this day, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart

and all your soul, then I will favor your land with rain at the proper season – rain in the autumn and rain in the spring – and you will have an ample harvest of grain and wine and oil. I will assure abundance in the fields for your cattle. You will eat to contentment. Take care lest you be tempted to forsake God and turn to false gods in worship. For then the wrath of the Lord will be directed against you. He will close the heavens and hold back the rain; the earth will not yield its produce. You will soon disappear from the good land which the Lord is giving you. Therefore, impress these words of Mine upon your heart. Bind them as a sign upon your hand, and let them be a reminder above your eyes. Teach them to your children. Repeat them at home and away, morning and night. Inscribe them upon the doorposts of your homes and upon the gates. Then your days and days of your children on the land which the Lord swore to give to your ancestors will endure as the days of the heavens over the earth. (Deuteronomy 11:13-21)

This text describes a God who offers reward for obedience and threatens punishment if the people stray from God's ways. Many find it troubling to think of God responding to our actions by rewarding or punishing us, either communally or individually. Complicating things further is the fact that we all know righteous people who suffer and evil people who prosper. And yet this text is part of the *Shema*, a core element of traditional liturgy.

When asked about why we skip this page, I regularly responded by explaining that page 20 was a long paragraph with a lot of difficult Hebrew and we didn't have time to recite it all aloud. I then added that there were some tough ideas too, and that some time we might have time to discuss them:

There are a couple of reasons why we don't do the second paragraph of the *Shema*. The first is that it is just long, and we haven't had a chance to learn the Hebrew in the second paragraph. The second is that there are some ideas in the second paragraph of the *Shema* that are hard for me to figure out how to teach you. So, I am working very hard to figure out how we can talk about it. But we will, I promise. (Transcript, March 5, 1995)

Many students who asked about page 20 were in the older grades. They were sophisticated thinkers who could have easily engaged in a discussion about this rather difficult but significant text. Had we been in a classroom with just the older students, I am certain that I could have found a way to study and discuss the text. In addition, even for students in the middle school, I could have used this as an opportunity to explore how different movements respond and interpret the very difficult text. Instead given the constraints of the setting, I glossed over the students' questions, proceeded with our service and did not return to the matter. Of course, I am aware of the fact that teachers often offer some other excuse for skipping over students' questions. Often conceptualized as a curriculum coverage problem, I cannot be sure that—had I been in a classroom—there would not have been times when I would have acted in ways similar to leading the service.

On another occasion, Vered, a fifth grader, asked why we always recite a certain line of the *Shema*<sup>53</sup> silently. She explained that at her summer camp that line was said aloud. I answered:

One of the things we have learned is that different synagogues do different things. ... the way we do things here at KI is one way of doing things. But in the Jewish tradition, especially related to things in the liturgy, different *shuls* [synagogues] do things differently. We will talk a little bit more about that later on.

We never discussed this point. I never answered Vered's question. The students never learned why some congregations recite the line aloud and why

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<sup>53</sup> After reciting "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One" it is traditional to recite "Praised be His glorious sovereignty throughout all time." silently, before continuing on with the verses from Deuteronomy. Love the Lord Your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might...

others recite the line silently. I think that if we were in a classroom I could have explained why this line is traditionally recited silently. There are various explanations that have been offered over the years<sup>54</sup>. I might have presented these explanations to the students and asked them if they find any of the explanations compelling.

Following a discussion about changing the liturgy, Natalie, a seventh grader, asked whether changing the liturgy is controversial (Transcript, March 26, 1995). Were we in a classroom setting, I might have had the students suggest their ideas about changing the liturgy. I could have divided the students in two groups and had each group discuss the pros or cons of initiating such changes. I do not think I would have just answered her question, without first exploring what the students were thinking. But given the constraints of the services as a teaching setting, I answered Natalie's question by explaining that "there is a lot of controversy about changing the words of the prayer book" (Transcript, March 26, 1995). While I allowed for a little bit of discussion, I worried that if we spent too much time discussing Natalie's question we would not have enough time to complete services. Finally, some students asked some very crucial questions. Toward the end of services one Sunday, Rachel asked:

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<sup>54</sup> There is a tradition that when Jacob was dying in Egypt, he gathered his sons about him and made them promise to continue following the One True God, the God of his father and grandfather. The tradition explains that Jacob's sons said the first line of the Shema Hear O Israel, our God is One. And Jacob softly whispered "Blessed is God's name forever and ever." Since then many Jews have kept the custom of reciting the first verse from Deuteronomy aloud, and the next line silently. There is another explanation for why this line is recited silently as well. It is said that when Moses went to heaven, heard the ministering angels praising God. They were saying "Blessed is God's name forever and ever." Moses brought these words of praise back to the people of Israel. They recited these words aloud only on Yom Kippur, because on that day they are as pure as angels. But the rest of the year they whisper the verse.

If you asked God to bring rain to your crops and he doesn't and you know that God is up there ... how could he not [answer your prayers] (Transcript, April 9, 1995).

Rachel was asking a critically important question. I am not sure exactly what was on her mind, understanding what she was after would have taken more probing on my part. Perhaps she was asking how does one pray if their prayers are not answered? Or how is it possible that God does not answer our prayers? I commended Rachel for asking such an important question. Two girls responded to Rachel's question. Rebecca said: "Well, the way I think of it is that sometimes people will say it [the prayers] but they won't really say it [them] like they actually mean it. Vered, a 4th grader, responded a bit differently.

It reminds me of a book I read Heidi, she is praying to God that something will happen, but it doesn't happen so she gets all frustrated. But then later on it happens and she realizes that it was good that it happened later on a while after she had prayed, because it made it even better (Transcript, April 9, 1995).

I knew that these comments were important. That is why I validated them. But I also wanted to be sure that we had time for our service. Without inviting any more discussion from Vered, Rebecca, or other students in the sanctuary, I abruptly said, "You know, I want to continue this discussion, but I want us to go on *davening* [praying]. Let's continue with *Michamocha* [the next prayer] and then we will come back to this later on (Transcript, April 9, 1995).

As I studied the videotapes, the pattern became all too apparent. I was never fully responsive to student-generated questions. In retrospect, I presume this was because I was focusing on completing our service in a timely fashion. Were I in a classroom, I am certain I would have been more responsive, even to the point of altering an entire lesson plan in order to follow students' questions or concerns. I,

of course, have no "proof" for this claim, given the fact that this inquiry did not involve contrasting my behavior in and out of the synagogue. That said, I believe that my classroom behavior is not as constrained by fears of covering the material. Maintaining the integrity of the service was my top priority. I did not want to allow my students to entertain the notion that we could skip services in order to have more time for discussion. Devoting time to regularly praying together was essential, even if that meant sacrificing other aspects of my teaching. In the midst of the experience, I did not recognize these tensions. It was only in retrospective analysis of my teaching that I was able to see that the goal praying together could—ultimately did—sometimes clash with my goal of discussing the content and meaning of those prayers.

### **A Rabbi, Preacher and Teacher in Israel**

My diploma from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America confers upon me authority to exercise the functions of rabbi, preacher and teacher in Israel. One of the hardest challenges I encountered at KI was knowing what role to play and when. Being a rabbi came naturally to me, I was the ordained spiritual leader of the KI school.<sup>55</sup> The other two roles were harder for me to figure out.

In the American Heritage dictionary it says a preacher is one who "expounds upon in writing or in speech; especially, to urge acceptance of or compliance with specified religious or moral principles." In contrast the American Heritage dictionary says a teacher "imparts knowledge or skills." Synonyms for the word

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<sup>55</sup> This becomes a bit complicated because I was not appointed rabbi of the congregation. I was hired to be the school director. But I was a rabbi and I could not compartmentalize that role. In

teach include instruct, educate, tutor, train, discipline or drill. Notice that there is a definite difference between the role of preacher and teacher. And at KI, I had to learn to negotiate the differences between these roles. While at KI, I did not understand some of my struggles clearly. Now, six years later, I believe that I experienced certain tensions when I was unsure of my role. Was I to respond as a preacher with certain answers whose function was to urge compliance or acceptance of particular behaviors? Or was I a teacher whose function was to guide KI members on a religious journey, helping them to learn more about Judaism? In what follows I describe and analyze some significant moments that demonstrate the tension I experienced.

My being a Conservative rabbi complicated my experiences at KI. I am committed to Jewish law, while most of the KI congregants were committed to different aspects of Jewish life. Some were eager to be involved in social action, others committed themselves to volunteer work at the synagogue. Valid and worthwhile commitments, the commitments of the congregants were nonetheless different from my own. I needed to learn how to negotiate our differences. Often, I felt that when I raised a question about the religious practices of the school, I needed to be cautious. In my journal I wrote:

One of my major questions ... is to figure out how to represent the tradition in a way that is both true to [Jewish] tradition, and respectful of my students' homes. (Journal Entry, January 16, 1995)

On the one hand, I did not want parents to feel as though I were condemning their choices or judging their lifestyles. On the other hand, I wanted students to

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addition, the school and the congregation are intertwined. Often I was speaking to a school

know about religious practices their families chose not to observe. For example, even though no one from the KI community felt obligated to pray daily, I thought it was important for students to know that some Jews choose to pray daily.

Similarly, I wanted students to know that many Jews observe the Sabbath by refraining from certain activities, by enjoying a festive meal, and by attending synagogue. The tension I experienced is not unique. Rabbi Michael Gold (1995) wrote:

The essence of the problem is, am I as a rabbi responsible to Judaism or to Jews? Am I responsible to teach the wisdom of tradition, even if that tradition is sometimes inflexible and possibly cruel? Or do I embrace Jews in their multitudes of ...lifestyles, even if those lifestyles are far from Jewish tradition or perhaps, most difficult of all, is it possible to be a bridge between Judaism and Jews, and somehow, through counseling and classes, bring them closer together? (p. 55)

The questions that Gold asks are critical. In my work, I too worried that I would either misrepresent Judaism in my efforts to be inclusive or I might offend members of the KI community in my efforts to be faithful to the traditions I deemed important.

As I reviewed my journal and videotapes, I became convinced that my teaching of prayer was affected by my not being sure of my role. As a teacher, I was able to accept the notion that the child and the subject matter "are simply two limits which define a single process" (Dewey, 1902, p. 189). I understood my role was to expose students to aspects of Judaism that were new and different. I wasn't discouraged, that was my role as an educator. My job was to bring the Jewish universe into the KI students' world.

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parent or thinking about how congregants' actions affected the school environment.



But the preacher in me did not know how to follow Dewey's warning to "abandon the notion of subject matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child's experience" (Dewey, 1902, p. 189). The preacher in me wanted to show the community 'religious Truth.' This perspective is accompanied by starkly different assumptions about the child. As Dewey (1902) notes:

the child is simply the immature being who is to be matured; he is the superficial being who is to be deepened; his is narrow experience which is to be widened. It is his to receive, to accept. His part is fulfilled when he is ductile and docile. (p. 186)

While this was not my approach to the KI school families, there were instances where I wondered if this should be my approach. I worried that I was not representing Judaism authentically.

On one occasion, I was discussing a concept we had addressed many times. It seemed obvious and non-controversial in a liberal congregation to suggest to students that there are many ways to practice Judaism. I raised the issue for my students in the following way:

We were talking about the fact that some people in the room were saying we *daven* [pray] because we are commanded to and other people were saying that's not really so. We should *daven* because we want to because it makes you feel good, because you could feel God's love, as a way of telling God how much we love God. And other people said no no, you should *daven* all the time because you have to. It shouldn't be because you have to ... I wanted to make sure that you understood, that there is not ... a Jewish answer to that discussion. One of the things about Judaism, is that there are lots of different ways of practicing Judaism ... I wanted us to go back and make sure that you understood there are a lot of Jewish people in this world who say we pray because God wants us to. . . . There are a lot of Jewish people who say we pray because we want to, because it feels good, because I like it, because I enjoy it, because I love being with a community, because I love the time to *daven* by myself, because it helps me remember things. Does that make sense to you? This idea that there is a whole range of ways to think about Jewish prayer.

In my journal, I explained that it was important for me to help students become familiar with a range of different Jewish practices. I was uncomfortable allowing them to believe that the Kehillat Israel way was the only Jewish way. For example, most of the members (both men and women) of the congregation did not wear *tallit* or *tefillin* regularly. In contrast, *tallit* and *tefillin* were exceedingly important for me. I wore them every morning and felt as though they were an important part of my experience praying. I thought it was important to teach about *tallit* or *tefillin*, but was unsure how to do so. My journal reflects this internal debate:

I am now thinking about how to represent *tefillin* to kids who have probably never ever seen *tefillin* before. Their fathers and mothers don't wear them... Sometimes I think I shouldn't bother teaching about *tefillin* at KI. They are not a part of the family's Jewish life. And yet, I feel that part of being Jewishly literate is knowing what *tefillin* are and how to put them on. I feel that kids at KI will be missing out if they never learn what *tefillin* are and when you wear them. (Journal 1/16/95)

Notice the tension. I wanted to preach about the obligation of *tallit* and *tefillin*. But I believed that at KI preaching about that particular observance would not be so fruitful. So instead, I framed the issue as a teaching issue. I could justify teaching about *tallit* and *tefillin* at KI, but not preaching about them. I knew that KI congregants would support my teaching, but would be made to feel uncomfortable were I to preach about them instead.

The challenge for me as a preacher and teacher was to serve a community in a way that allowed me to respect the congregants while also maintain some kind of professional integrity. As a young rabbi, just out of school, I constantly worried that I was not fulfilling my role as rabbi, preacher, and teacher.

Before I continue I should explain a critical point about my work in Lansing. Then – and now – I respect that no one person has *the* Jewish answers or knows exactly what it means to live an authentic Jewish life. I recognize that my way of practicing Judaism is not *the* way, but rather one of many ways. But even as I write these words, I confront a paradox: As a teacher I can understand that there are myriad ways to be a practicing Jew, but as a Jew, I practice in the ways that feel right to me. This is an inescapable paradox faced by all teachers.

Many of the families at KI were committed to instilling in their children a sense of Jewish identity. Some parents did not express this ritually, but they did have a strong commitment to Judaism. These families expressed their commitment by participating in social action projects in the community, or engaging in study, or in connecting to extended Jewish family members. My orientation to Judaism was very different than many of the school families I encountered. Most of the families in the school believed that everything about Judaism is voluntary. These families practiced Judaism because they wanted to, or because they believed it was a familial expectation. No one I knew felt as though God had commanded the Jewish people to observe any particular ritual. While some families wanted their children to learn about these practices, others were openly resistant and wondered why their children needed to learn about practices the parents themselves did not wish to pursue.

Believing that the purpose of the school curriculum was to offer the students a view of the full universe of Jewish ideas (Dewey, 1902), I wanted students in the school to know that, for some Jews, obligation to God was a key to

understanding motivation. More generally, I thought it was important for students to appreciate that, for liberal Jews, there are many legitimate ways to practice Judaism. Given that I was teaching in the midst of a service and students were seeing me in my *tallit* and *tefillin*, it made sense for me to explain why I wore *tallit* and *tefillin* and why other adults did not. In addition, knowing that students visited other synagogues, I wanted to be sure to discuss different religious practices.

Still, there were times that I doubted myself. I worried about the message I was sending. In my journal I wrote:

I am troubled that the message they [students] learn is that some people in other *shuls* wear them [*tefillin*]. "But they are not for us. We don't have to wear them." With the older students, I feel as though I am teaching about the Eskimos when I talk about *tefillin*. It feels removed and distant [from their Jewish lives]. (Journal Entry, February 1, 1995)

I worried that my efforts to avoid offending anyone bordered on compromising centuries-old Jewish values. In other words, my rhetoric of "let them know that there are equally valid ways," was not entirely honest, for—on a personal level—I wore the *tallit* and *tefillin* because I had no choice. There are no other "valid" ways to think about this on that personal level. It is my obligation.

There are Jewish communities in which the rabbi makes the rules. This was not one of them. I could not make the rules; that was not my job or place. But that did not make it any easier when my personal desires or commitments as a practicing Jew conflicted with those of the congregants. I still had this nagging feeling that I needed to be a preacher, even though my role was educational director.

I offer another example: I was talking with a mother who had a younger child in the KI school and an older child graduating high school. In East Lansing that year, the spring break coincided with Passover. The mother explained that her daughter was going to miss the family *seder* so that she could go on a cruise with her classmates. I was stunned. How could a parent allow her child to miss one of the most important Jewish holidays of the year? I distinctly remember being silent about the matter and feeling disappointed with myself because I could not find a way to convince this mother to reconsider her decision. I thought to myself, "What kind of a preacher in Israel are you?"

Consider my relationship with Joshua. Joshua was a congregant who volunteered to teach in the religious school on a steady basis. He enjoyed his teaching and came to our Sunday morning service most of the time. Sometimes when he came to services he wore *tefillin* and *tallit*. Other times, he chose not to. I was unsure about how to approach him. I was grateful that he came to services, but really wanted him to wear his *tallit* and *tefillin* each time he came. I remember saying something like, "Josh, it would be great if you could wear your *tallit* and *tefillin* more often." My message was not very clear. I did not say "Josh, I really think that you should wear your *tallit* and *tefillin* each time you pray with us."

With both Stephanie's mother and Joshua I think that I was struggling with my role as teacher and preacher.

At the time, I did not understand my inner tension in this way. Instead, I was very critical of myself, believing that I was so sensitive to their feelings—or so aware of the differences between our religious orientations—that I failed to

express my principles and I failed to challenge them to re-think their actions. Each time I remained silent I berated myself, for being unprincipled or weak. I did not recognize that I was juggling several roles, and knowing which cap to wear when was very difficult.

I am describing a complicated situation. A preacher cannot always challenge her congregants to reconsider their religious practices. There are times when silence is the best response. People do not want to always feel as though everything they do is being scrutinized by their rabbi. And as a rabbi, I can't always be challenging. I have to let some things go. But when should I look the other way? When should I remain silent?

And I can't help but wonder how Dewey's analysis of the relationship between the curriculum and the child can frame my thinking. Dewey suggests that there is a way to connect the lives and experiences of the child with the organized bodies of knowledge. One must not dismiss the child's experiences nor should one sacrifice the subject matter. Rather he suggests that the ideal is a

continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth. . . (p. 189)

Of course, part of Dewey's analysis presumes that knowledge grows and changes. Thus, introducing the child to the subject matter involves both accepted wisdom and the ability to question that accepted wisdom. Perhaps this is part of my dilemma: Religious truths are not the same as historical truths or literary truths. Religious truths are often matters of faith. They may or may not change over time. They are not rationale nor can they be proven to be correct or

incorrect. They reflect individual perspectives or approaches to understanding the world and living life.

I continue to struggle with how to bridge the gap between the learner's present experience and the Jewish tradition. I also struggle because I often do not know when to challenge, how to challenge, and what to challenge is very difficult. My principles are personal commitments. As a Conservative Jew, there are some things I do because I have to: I don't reason through them, I don't consider their pros and cons, I simply accept certain religious traditions as binding. I was working with a congregation where very few people acted or thought in those ways. Our worldviews were radically different, and this presented challenges. I was trying to inspire adults and children to integrate more Judaism into their lives. But I did not want to press too hard, or appear to be over-zealous or insensitive. Yet, in respecting the boundaries of those around me, I constantly worried about honoring my own values and beliefs.

I think this issue was especially complicated for me because I was a young rabbi, just out of school. I did not have years of experience to draw upon. I worried that I was allowing those around me to think that in Judaism anything goes. At the same time, I was not the rabbi of the congregation, I was the educational director who happened to be a rabbi. While I knew that my job responsibilities were different, I was also an ordained rabbi, preacher, and teacher in Israel. I was confused about how to conduct myself.

In addition to being an inexperienced rabbi, I felt isolated in Lansing. There were no other rabbis, cantors, or Jewish educators for me to work with me. I had

no role models to help me find my way in this uncharted territory. And there was not a community of Conservative Jews who could support me in my thinking.

Finally, I was and continue to be on a religious journey. I feel commanded to observe certain religious practices, yet there are other traditions I do not yet observe. I was aware of a certain inconsistency and worried about how that might interfere with my teaching. I did not want to be hypocritical. But I had this nagging feeling that I was making choices for the congregation or the school. I worried that it was not for me to make these choices. Yet I knew that someone had to decide what traditions to teach.

Another interesting and related issue surfaced. Consider how I taught certain "facts." I regularly suggested that some issues we discussed had correct and incorrect answers. On more than one occasion, I said, "I'm asking about things that are true everywhere." The implication was that all Jews agreed about certain aspects of services. For example, I asked students the following kinds of questions: "How many people can be counted in a *minyan*?" "How old does one have to be to be counted in a *minyan*?" "Could one recite the *Shema* or the mourner's *kaddish* without a *minyan*?" I asked these questions because I wanted KI students to know certain facts about Jewish prayer. I did not want them to assume that anything was acceptable. I believe that being comfortable in a service means that students would understand what was happening and why. I wanted my students to learn "the rules of the game" in addition to being comfortable with the liturgy.



But my "correct" answers to the kinds of questions I asked during the beginning part of our service reflect a particular perspective or ideology within Judaism. For example, I explained that 10 Jewish adults over the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah count in a *minyan*. However, traditional Judaism only counts men, Conservative Judaism accepts men and women, and Reform Judaism allows for the possibility of not requiring a *minyan* for public worship. For many of the "rules of the game" kinds of questions, I did not explore how other Jews might answer the questions. I thought it was too complicated to discuss how denominational affiliation might affect the answers being given. I taught rules that reflected the practices of the congregation and that I was comfortable embracing.

On the one hand, I wanted students to know there was more than one way to practice Judaism. I thought it was important for them to be familiar with a range of Jewish practices. On the other hand, I wanted students to learn the geography of the prayer book, the practical rules that apply to services. I called this type of information in my journal "the facts." Interestingly, these commitments competed with one another and might have confused students.

In many ways, my messages conflicted with one another. While I wanted students in the school to recognize that some practices were reflective of different ideological perspectives, at the same time I wanted them to be sensitive to the notion that many Jews outside of KI (including me) practiced Judaism differently. I wanted to teach the students in the school to be respectful of those whose practices and ideas varied from their families or our schools. But I also wanted them to know the "rules of the game." How was a student in the school to

know the difference between respecting a range of practices and knowing the "rules of the game"? When were they to accept that Jews have varying approaches to Jewish tradition? How were they to know which, if any, rules held true all of the time?

## **Conclusion**

In the previous chapters, I described some of the challenges of teaching prayer in a supplementary school setting. The waning observance of American Jewish families put an additional burden on the school system, which was simultaneously being asked to cover more material in fewer hours. In addition, the subject matter knowledge of supplementary school teachers is uneven. To address these issues, I decided to create a service for the students in the school. Like many Jewish educators, I was in a situation where my teachers did not know enough to teach prayer and my students were living in homes where traditional Jewish praying was seldom observed. The prepared curriculum being used at the school was so focused on Hebrew skills that I feared my students would never have an opportunity to struggle with the ideas of the liturgy or with issues related to prayer and praying. I also worried they would never learn how to pray. At the time, a regular service with teaching built into the format seemed like the solution to these challenges. Students would learn how to pray by participating in regular services. In addition, we would discuss the liturgy so that they would learn about the prayers and practices related to their regular studies. What I did not realize then is that my attempt to address the constraints in the KI school setting would ultimately create an entirely new set of challenges for the educator. I was certain

that my subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge were a great resource. I never considered how being a rabbi might complicate my teaching experiences.

Examining my own teaching helped me to learn more about my practice and has enabled me to think differently about a school service. If I were to work in a supplementary school setting again, I would still introduce a school service as a means for enabling students to learn how to pray. However, I would be more aware of the tension encountered when teaching prayers in the midst of a traditional prayer service. As a result, I would be much more cautious about what prayers I would chose to teach, avoiding those prayers that are more theologically troubling and require more time for discussion. I would make it a point to find a way to follow-up on student generated questions. Finally, I would strongly encourage parents to participate in the service since I know parents are often uncomfortable and unknowledgeable about Jewish prayer as well. That said, these changes would not help me avoid the more fundamental tensions and challenges that I will continue to face as a Conservative rabbi working with Jews who do not share my religious orientation.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **NA'ASEH V'NSHMA<sup>56</sup>: WE WILL DO AND WE WILL UNDERSTAND**

This inquiry has deepened my understanding of the complexities involved in the teaching of prayer. Dewey (1938) suggests that the purpose of a curriculum can be understood by focusing on three important aspects:

(1) observation of surrounding conditions; (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a knowledge obtained partly by recollection and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have had a wider experience; and (3) judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. (p. 69)

This dissertation is organized around just such an inquiry. In Chapter Three, I investigated the historical circumstances and social realities that inform the teaching of prayer. I thought it was important to understand how prayer came to be taught in the school and how the modern liberal lifestyle informed the teaching of prayer. Chapter Four turns to surrounding conditions. I examine prepared curricular materials in the hopes of learning how thoughtful Jewish educators conceptualized the teaching of prayer. I thought I could understand the challenges better by examining well-regarded curricular materials which are being used in supplementary schools all over the United States. Finally, Chapter Five is an examination of my own actions and judgments. I was an experienced teacher, who knew her subject matter well and was committed to teaching prayer to children. By examining my practice, I had access to the judgments of a practitioner trying to put together the needs of the students and the principles of the subject matter.

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<sup>56</sup> Exodus 24:7

While these essays do shed light on the historical and social context for the teaching of prayer, and they reveal how one practitioner attempted to teach prayer in a liberal supplementary school setting, this dissertation is in no way complete. There are many kinds of data that are not included in these essays. For example, I never interviewed the students or parents of KI. I do not know how they understood their own Jewish experiences, nor do I know how their religious journeys. The only information I have included are my impressions, perceptions, and reflections. Thus, this dissertation is limited. Similarly, in the curriculum investigation I did not interview students who use the curricula, teachers who enact the curricula, educational directors who chose the curricula, or the curriculum writers. And as a result, my observations about the curricula are similarly limited.

Despite its many limitations, I hope this study helps educators to be better equipped in addressing some of the endemic and intractable challenges that manifest themselves when teaching prayer in a liberal setting. Liberal Jews have had many difficulties with the traditional liturgy. They are often troubled by, or do not relate to, some of the theological assumptions. Furthermore, praying in Hebrew poses a major problem to many. Finally, many liberal Jews attend synagogue not so much to pray but to be with other Jews, to listen to beautiful music, or to hear an interesting sermon. "Synagogue for them is not so much the house of God as another Jewish house, communal rather than private, in which

they can be at home and so take refuge from the hurly-burly of everyday life" (Cohen & Eisen, 2000, p. 177).

In this final chapter, I begin by addressing some of the conceptual complexities that surface repeatedly over these chapters. I then move on to some practical implications for practitioners.

### **Negotiating the Tension Between Teaching Basic Hebrew Skills and Teaching for Understanding**

When schools took on the responsibility for teaching prayer, curricula writers deliberated about how prayer should be taught. As we saw in the analyses of curricula, Jewish educators disagreed about whether to emphasize Hebrew prayer skills or important ideas expressed in the liturgy. Curricula writers—and educators more broadly—have often chosen one goal over the other. By understanding the tensions that surfaced in the prepared curricular materials, educators might better articulate the complexities of teaching prayer. Most educators working in a liberal setting are torn between teaching prayers—by which I mean teaching ideas and theology of the liturgy—and teaching praying—by which I mean teaching students how to recite the Hebrew prayer, when to stand or sit and how to conduct themselves during services.

In the curricula I examined, there was a tension between focussing on Hebrew skills that would enable students to participate in public worship or focusing on ideas that would enable students to understand the substance of the prayers. It is important for educators to understand that either choice has consequences. And while the choice does not exclude the teaching of the other topic, educators have to prioritize their curricular goals.

On the one hand, by focussing on the ideas of the liturgy, students can become acquainted with important ideas central to Judaism. These ideas may help them remain committed to Judaism and understand why Judaism is important for them. The ideas in the liturgy, however, will not help them know what to do in synagogue. Nor will studying the important concepts articulated in the liturgy help students acquire the Hebrew skills necessary to participate in public worship.

On the other hand, by choosing the curriculum that equates prayers with mastery of Hebrew reading skills, students will most likely read Hebrew fluently and acquire skills necessary to recite the prayers and participate in public worship. However, other concerns arise: Will students' experiences at synagogue services be meaningful because they have the necessary skills? Will there be other opportunities in the students' lives for them to learn the big ideas of the liturgy? Of course, as Dewey often cautioned, thinking in dichotomies often obscures the connectedness of ideas. Teaching prayer and teaching praying need not be either/or enterprises.

However, there is an inescapable tension between them. The tension is not limited to the teaching of prayer. More broadly, liberal supplementary school educators struggle with how to teach traditional ideas and observances in modern settings. Consider the Sabbath. How does a teacher represent the Jewish Sabbath to children who live in homes where the Sabbath is not a holy day, but rather a day-off from school or work, or a day to take care of errands. Does a teacher represent the ideas of the Sabbath? Or does a teacher focus on

the skills and knowledge necessary for students to know how to observe the Sabbath? Since it cannot be assumed that students are learning how to observe the Sabbath at home, educators need to decide what aspects of the subject matter should be emphasized. While a teacher might try to attend to both the skills and knowledge simultaneously, one aspect of the curriculum often gets more attention. Which will it be is the significant question?

On the one hand, the ideas of the Sabbath are profoundly meaningful. One cannot fully grasp what the Jewish Sabbath is about without connecting it to creation, the Exodus from Egypt, or the people's relationship with God. For these individuals, studying these important ideas inspires them to observe the Sabbath. On the other hand, learning the ideas—with no opportunity to acquire skills—is inadequate.

### **Prayer and Modern Mindset**

The book of Exodus tells us that when the Torah was revealed to the Israelites on Mount Sinai, they responded by proclaiming "All that the Lord has spoken we will faithfully do!" (Exodus 24:7). Traditional Jewish commentators have always interpreted that response to mean that the Israelites were willing to faithfully accept God's commandments as being obligatory—even if they did not understand all that God was asking. Committing oneself to fulfilling the commandments before understanding them expresses ultimate and complete faith in God. In *Etz Hayim* (2001), the Conservative movement's commentary on the Bible, a note on this verse relates to this study:

The Israelites could have responded, as most would today, "We will seek to understand and, if we are persuaded, we will agree to do



them." Instead, having met God in Egypt, at the sea, and at Mount Sinai, the Israelites trusted that God's demands would be reasonable and in their best interest. (p. 478)

This commentary highlights a significant difference between the Israelites and modern liberal Jews. The Israelites, like Jews throughout most of Jewish history, accepted God's laws, on faith. They were willing to abide by the commandments, without proof of God's existence and without understanding exactly what it is that God expects of them or why they are being asked to perform these commandments. Their obedience has been interpreted as an act of faith. The tradition and its texts are authoritative. The Jew is bound by that authority.

As explained in earlier chapters, faith does not come easily to modern liberal Jews. They need first to understand and study before deciding whether or not to observe religious traditions. Following the tradition because of its authority is not part of their mindset. The *Etz Hayim* commentary clearly recognizes that many modern liberal Jews need help understanding obedience based on faith. The commentary continues:

Just as we accept medicine from our physician on trust, without understanding what it is or how it works, and commit ourselves to marriage, to parenthood, and to a career as acts of faith before we fully understand what they entail, so too the Israelites accepted God's will. There are many things in life that we cannot appreciate before we have lived them and come to appreciate their value. We must do them first and only afterward realize why. (p. 478)

Notice the commentator does not assume that Conservative Jews obey the commandments because of their faith in God. Rather the commentary uses other examples to help the modern Jew grasp the concept of doing and then understanding. Recognizing the need for several illustrations, the commentary gives us many examples. Some of us follow our physician's instructions, without

*really* understanding how the medicine will work. Others get married, or decide to have children without fully comprehending how their lives will be changed. Still others choose a career with only a limited understanding of the implications for that choice. The commentary tries to demonstrate how in other arenas of our lives we modern Jews are willing to act first—waiting until later to *fully* understand the implications of our actions. While in some instances we are willing to accept that actions lead to a more complete understanding, when it comes to religion many modern Jews want to understand first and will only then consider acting.

This need to understand before doing complicates the teaching of prayer.

Not only are schools now expected to teach children how to recite prayers and participate in public worship, they are also expected to teach the meaning of the prayers. This new reality complicates the educator's job in profound ways.

Many notable Jewish thinkers have recognized how modernity has challenged religious education and observance. Arthur Green (1994) presented a paper to the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College in which he discusses how Judaism should be presented in the post-modern era. Green acknowledges many of the problems I have discussed in this paper, and he offers image of how Jewish leaders might create meaningful experiences for the community.

Addressing prayer specifically, Green claims:

There will continue to be synagogues well into the post-modern age, where old-fashioned *davening* will go on. There will also be egalitarian settings in which such prior-age prayer will continue. You will often find me in one of those places on *Shabbat*, for which I make no apology. But I hardly think this is what most of our Jews need these days. I would also like to see there be a silent *Kabbalat*

***Shabbat* [Friday afternoon] service in our cities, where the beginning of the holy day is marked with candle lighting, a period of wordless chanting, a long time of silent awareness of the change of light in that mysterious hour (there should be a natural light-source or view of the outdoors, and no artificial lighting except *Shabbat* candles), and ended with a shared *kiddush*. This can be a deep and moving Jewish spiritual experience, one that requires no Hebrew, demands no prior belief-structure, but also has none of the passivity and sterility of what usually passes for prayer in liberal Jewish settings. We should even have a *minyan* of Jews somewhere out there in post-sixties land who come together every day at sunrise and sunset to give their morning and afternoon offerings in silent awareness, perhaps ending a silent period with a called out *Shema*. There are a great many Jews who need such a service, and who by their presence could lend to it great depth and emotional resonance. We should be helping to provide it for them, as well as ourselves. (p. 17)**

Notice Green is struggling with many of the issues raised in this paper. Many modern Jews do not have the Hebrew skills for regular prayer nor do they have the necessary faith to commit to a regular practice that they do not fully comprehend. Thus Green suggests creating new experiences that allow individuals to express themselves religiously, albeit not with the traditional liturgy.

Green's analysis and the commentary in *Etz Hayim*, reinforce an important point. The challenges for the modern liberal Jew to connect with traditional ideas and experiences are profound. While practitioners cannot resolve the problems, neither should they ignore them. Rather they must think imaginatively about different ways of addressing these significant issues.

### **Implications for Practice: In and Out of School**

School practitioners have to make some very tough decisions as they examine prayer curricula. This study can guide them in their deliberations. The decision of how to direct the supplementary school curriculum is difficult and

either direction will—to a certain extent—be unsatisfying. If the curriculum emphasizes ideas, we will want our students to acquire more skills. If the curriculum emphasizes skills, we will want our students to understand the significant ideas that make Judaism a meaningful and compelling religion.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the tension focuses on a familiar educational dilemma: ought we teach the "basics" or ought we teach the ideas and concepts? There are no easy answers to this question and as educators go about choosing the appropriate curricula for their school, they need to consider who the students are, what life experiences they have and how other school activities can supplement what is being taught. No curriculum can cover all aspects of a particular subject. The challenge is for educators to be aware of the tension and to carefully consider the trade-offs of any resolution.

Dewey (1938) provides the educator who is struggling to prepare students for adult prayer experiences some interesting insights. He warns that it is important for the student to get

out of his present experience all that there is in it for him at the time in which he has it. When preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted. The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for the future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (p. 49)

Dewey argues that school experiences are critical and must be worthwhile in the moment. In terms of this study, in order that students' future encounters with

prayer be meaningful, their experiences must not just prepare them for the future but must be meaningful for the present. Dewey urges educators to recognize that the present can inform the future. And it is the responsibility of the educator to make responsible decisions that take both the present conditions and the future goals into consideration.

### **The School Service as a New Practice**

This dissertation has illuminated some of the significant issues of teaching prayer. In some ways, my teaching service was an attempt to merge two curricular traditions. My logic was that if I created a context in which I worked on the development of understanding, I could also simultaneously create a context in which children were motivated to acquire basic knowledge. I could, through strategic pedagogical decisions, serve both masters. I learned a lot from putting that teaching under a microscope, and my understanding of the attendant complications of such a service has deepened significantly.

Were I to become a supplementary school principal again, I would still introduce a school service. But my work would be informed by a new set of principles and questions. For one, I would be extremely cautious about what prayers to examine with the students. I would still teach some theologically challenging prayers but because I am more aware of the complexities of teaching in the midst of service, I would consider some different issues. I would ask how I could find ways to discuss these important and challenging prayers, without compromising our service. Perhaps I could use some class time to supplement my teaching so that I could focus on particular prayers with certain students.

In addition, I would also find ways to insure that I respond to students' questions in an appropriate and timely fashion. I might have an "Ask the Rabbi" box in the school and encourage students to put their questions in the box and then devote time monthly to answering the questions. If these questions could not be addressed during services, perhaps they could be answered in the weekly newsletter.

I would wonder what the participants in the service bring to our discussion. I would try and understand what they know that could help them better grasp these difficult prayers. And I would also take into consideration the inherent tensions between traditional and modern assumptions about the world. Most important, I would ask questions of myself. I would want to consider how my religious convictions influenced my goals for my students.

I do not believe that the school service I introduced was *the* solution to the challenges of teaching prayer in a supplementary school. Instead, I am suggesting that a service with a rabbi, cantor, or educator who is very well acquainted with the subject matter can make a difference. The service will still need to be closely monitored. One of the best ways to think about teaching prayer in the supplementary school is to find ways to involve parents and children in a meaningful prayer experience. Perhaps having a family service every Sunday morning where parents are asked to worship alongside their children would be effective. This could be especially worthwhile if the rabbi, cantor, or educator of the congregation were to commit to attending this regular service. Such a service could bring parents into the conversations about God and prayer.

While the service alone would not "solve" the problems of teaching prayer, it would be a good first step. It might also allow the school community to have regular contact with the congregation's rabbi, cantor, or senior educator.

Finally, were I to do this again, I would consider how music figures into the service. Cohen & Eisen (2000), Schwarz (2000), and Summit (2000) argue that music is an important element in the synagogue service. Yet, in my experience, most supplementary school educators do not consider how to incorporate music into the teaching of prayer. None of the curricula I examined addressed how music could contribute to the teaching. I myself also did not consider how music might enhance the service I conducted for the school.

While it is impossible to *solve* the problems of teaching prayer, this dissertation sheds light on what might be considered. Neither adding instructional hours, nor creating teacher education opportunities, nor conducting family education units in an effort to transform the home into a more observant place will resolve the issues.

For example, one might think that by increasing the number of school hours, the teaching of prayer would be greatly improved. I can easily imagine a practitioner claiming that two more hours a week would provide the necessary time to devote to teaching both Hebrew prayer skills and key concepts of the traditional liturgy. My dissertation suggests otherwise. While extra time might help, other issues would still loom. Educators would still have to contend with the waning practices in the home. They would still encounter the questions and

doubts that are typical of the modern liberal mindset. And they would still have to contend with a teaching corps that is unfamiliar with traditional prayer.

Similarly, I can imagine school principals claiming that teacher education opportunities are the key to solving the problems related to the teaching of prayer in supplementary schools. While obviously it is very important for teachers to learn more about the subjects they are teaching, teacher education alone cannot resolve all the issues in supplementary school education. As religious school hours continue to dwindle, it is impossible for teachers to cram more into the school day.

Students in our schools come from homes where prayers are not regularly recited and where there are many questions about God. If their parents do attend synagogue, they do not expect an encounter with God. Rather, they are coming to connect with other Jews and to create some sacred time in their busy lives. Students come to school with many questions about God that cannot be answered in their homes.

Thus, while having capable teachers—who really know their subject matter—respond to these questions is important, it is not enough. Educators will still have to contend with the disjuncture between tradition and modernity. Teacher education might help teachers grapple with this tension, but it will not solve the problem.

### **Teaching Prayer and Praying in Other Liberal Settings**

My research focussed on the supplementary school. I am certain that this dissertation would have had different findings were it to have included research



about KI members and their Jewish journeys. The dissertation describes the historical context of the supplementary school, and offers a limited understanding of who sent their children to supplementary schools during the past 50 years. I suspect, however, that many of the challenges I have described are not unique to the supplementary school. Potentially, this dissertation could inform the work of educators in formal and non-formal settings, and rabbis working with adults and children.

There are many different venues in which Jewish educators struggle with these issues. The supplemental schools are one such venue. Another involves camps and youth groups. While educators struggle with the same issues, there is a different theory of action in those informal settings. Camps allow children to live Judaism and youth groups allow them to experience it in informal settings. This is a different approach than the more formal classroom based one. Future research could examine how these endemic challenges are addressed in varied contexts.

Having been involved in Jewish summer camps, I know that counselors often struggle to create meaningful services. This dissertation is relevant to those working in Jewish camps, or those working in non-formal education. After all, it is the children who attend supplementary schools during the school year who often attend Jewish summer camps or participate in youth groups. The theological tensions between the traditional liturgy and the modern liberal Jewish home are the same in the informal setting as in the supplementary school. Also, it is worthy of future research to see if staffing issues are comparable to concerns about the teaching corps of the supplementary school. Finally, educators in informal

settings will have to deliberate about their educational goals. Are they attempting to enable participants to have meaningful prayer experiences? Or is the purpose to teach important Jewish ideas as represented in the liturgy?

Another important venue where children learn about prayer is the Jewish day school. While it is true that day school educators have many more hours to teach, the same issues rear themselves in that setting. There is the tension between the traditional liturgy and the students who live in modern liberal homes. While it is possible that day school parents might be a bit more observant, it is almost certain that some tensions do exist.

Day school educators also have to contend with the tension between teaching Hebrew and prayer skills and ideas. It might be tempting to assume that day school educators can teach both because there is more, that is erroneous. The day school curriculum is very committed to both intensive secular and Jewish studies.

### **Looking Forward: A Story**

The teaching of prayer is not an issue only for educators and rabbis working with children. Many adults are searching for a portal to Judaism. For some, learning how to participate in services feels critical while for others, studying about the prayers is compelling. This dissertation can help liberal rabbis, cantors and educators think about how to make prayer more accessible to serious adults who are struggling with prayers and praying. In particular, this dissertation has helped me see my work through new eyes. I conclude this dissertation with a story that illuminates my point.

My present congregation in Kansas City has had a task force for the last 3 years devoted to making worship more meaningful for the average congregant. There was great concern that most of the congregants do not come to services on any kind of regular basis. Those who do come are bored and do not understand the structure or meaning of the prayers. The task force struggled for a long time, trying to decide how to enable congregants to become more confident pray-ers. There was a learners' *minyan* where congregants studied the ideas behind the prayers. The people who came to the service also wanted worship experiences. But when they went to services, these same people yearned to understand the liturgy. Most recently, the congregation has begun to experiment with innovative services. The basic structure of the service has remained intact, but musical instruments have been added so that the service is very engaging. The committee is trying to create a service where attendees can participate in a meaningful service thereby acquiring basic prayer skills and also learning some of the important big ideas of the liturgy. This dissertation could help the members of the task force as they refine the goals for the service. It is relevant to any liberal practitioner thinking about how to teach traditional prayers to Jews who are not immersed in a traditional world where regular prayer is incorporated into one's private and communal life.

The efforts of my congregation are not unique. There is a national effort, known as Synagogue 2000, that is working to transform synagogues into vibrant spiritual institutions where learning runs deep, worship engages, and congregants matter. The founders of Synagogue 2000 believe that the American

synagogue is failing. In the curriculum of the project, the following problem is succinctly described:

Most American Jews are fully integrated into modern Western culture and values but are carrying around a pre-modern understanding of God. The problem began in Europe in the nineteenth century, not here in America. By the time our forebearers arrived here as immigrants, they had mostly jettisoned the traditional God-images. As a result, many considered themselves atheists. In Eastern Europe, some channeled their Jewish messianic fervor into socialism, remaining proud cultural Jews without the baggage of a God they could not believe in. In Western Europe, with the advance of scientific and intellectual Enlightenment thought, Jews became as skeptical as their non-Jewish peers about the idea of a personal God active in history. Jews from both Western and Eastern Europe built synagogues here, but their synagogues served as social meeting places and ethnic compounds more often than as a sacred meeting place for divine encounters. With the emergence of American ideas of corporate efficiency in the twentieth century, and the suburbanization of much of Jewish life, synagogue leaders concentrated on making their organizations efficient deliverers of services to a consumer-oriented population. Today, Jews are increasingly identifying themselves as yearning for spiritual connectedness, and are looking to their synagogues as spiritual communities. (p. 4-21)

The leaders of the Synagogue 2000 project recognize that a major problem for American Jewish adults is that they are searching for meaning in their lives, and the synagogue—which is secular in some important ways—is failing them. Those involved with this project are trying to transform the synagogue so that it can once again be a spiritual center for American Jewish adults.

Ultimately, my dissertation can inform the thinking of researchers and practitioners trying to understand the significant challenges inherent in teaching traditional ideas and practices in a modern liberal context.

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