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From the Editor

by BARBARA DAVIS

Several years ago, NPR correspondent Barbara Bradley Hagerty reported that “scientists are making the first attempts to understand spiritual experience—and what happens in the brains and bodies of people who believe they connect with the divine. The field is called ‘neurotheology,’ and although it is new, it’s drawing prominent researchers in the US and Canada. Scientists have found that the brains of people who spend untold hours in prayer and meditation are different.”

This issue of HaYidion focuses on prayer, tefilah. While there are no scientific studies included, there are many examinations of the theme from different perspectives: poetic, analytical, pedagogical, philosophical. Prayer is not hard to define. Wikipedia calls it “an invocation or act that seeks to activate a rapport with a deity, an object of worship, or a spiritual entity through deliberate communication.” It has been said that all prayer falls into one of three categories: Wow; Please, please; and thank you. Someone wrote that prayer represents the pray-er saying “God—pay attention...to ME.” But prayer is also infinitely complex and is subject—particularly in the school setting—to becoming denatured.

The authors in this issue struggle with the fact that prayer in school is often rote, devoid of meaning, emotionless, irrelevant to the pray-ers. They analyze the causes of the impoverishment of what should be a transcendent experience, and they offer creative and often passionate suggestions for the enhancement of the prayer experience. Their analyses are cogent and enlightening, and offer meaningful pathways to enhance and enrich davening.

The poet Robert Frost, in a sermon in a synagogue, said that religion “is the straining of the spirit forward to a wisdom beyond wisdom.” Prayer is a means for us to reach out to that “wisdom beyond wisdom.” Moreover, Jewish prayer, which is quintessentially communal prayer, allows participants to overcome the immense sense of loneliness in the universe that sometimes overwhelms all of us. As educators and educational leaders, we seek to give the gifts of prayer to our students. This issue of HaYidion will inspire you to find new ways to meet the challenge of doing so.
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-Aaron Green, Master Architect of the American Hebrew Academy and protege of Frank Lloyd Wright

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A Tribute to Arnee Winshall, RAVSAK Chair

by Barbara Davis

Arnee Winshall is completing her term as the founding chair of RAVSAK’s Board of Directors. I am usurping her column this quarter to pay tribute to the amazing work she has done in this capacity.

It is hard to find the right words to adequately capture the essence of Arnee; she is a devoted daughter, wife, mother, and caretaker. She is an educator, a linguist and a pioneer. But most of all, I think, Arnee is a builder. Through the whirlwind of travel and tasks that make up her busy life, Arnee is laying the foundation for our future.

The first time I saw her was on a panel at a RAVSAK conference, and somehow I learned that she was our destiny. Her willingness to serve as the founding chair of the new lay board of RAVSAK was a gift to us. Her concern for the former executive committee members and her sensitivity to the seismic nature of the transformation that was occurring in our organization, from a board led by school professionals to one composed of lay leaders, were crucial in the successful transition to the place we are today.

Arnee is our treasure—she is thoughtful, kind, considerate, intelligent, articulate and fun. Her connections are so numerous, her willingness to roll up her sleeves and get a job done is so inspirational, that it is hard to know how to sum up her attributes. There is a little poem, however, that describes her well, and we dedicate it to her on behalf of all of those she has led at RAVSAK:

Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can.

Thank you, Arnee, for all the good you have done for RAVSAK, its schools, its members, its students, its present and its future. We will always be guided by the example you have set as we work to fulfill RAVSAK’s mission to strengthen and sustain the Jewish life, leadership and learning of community day schools, ensuring a vibrant Jewish future.
Good & Welfare

**B’nai Israel Community Day School** of Gainesville, FL, was awarded the Meridian Choice, Hope and Recovery Community Award for collecting children’s supplies for residents of local treatment programs.

Students from Houston’s **Emery/Weiner School** collected stuffed animals for the students of Sandy Hook Elementary.

The **Jewish Academy of Orlando** is pleased to announce that it has been named an Apple Distinguished School, meeting criteria for innovation, leadership, and educational excellence, and fulfilling Apple’s vision of exemplary learning environments.

Slater Sousley, a senior at the **Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy** in Kansas City, is a finalist in the Arts Council of Johnson County’s Shooting Stars Scholarship, an award celebrating the achievements of young artists and arts educators with college scholarships, awards and honorariums.

Dr. Silvia Kurlat-Ares, Upper School Spanish teacher at the **Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School** in Silver Spring, MD, has been invited by the Ibero-American Institute to present a paper at their symposium in Berlin, based on her research on Latin American science fiction.

Junior Justin Etzine of the **David Posnack Jewish Day School** in Plantation, FL, installed computer labs at three different police stations in the Bahamas. He also developed a programming curriculum and taught it to local children. The Bahamian prime minister awarded him a commendation.

At the conclusion of performances of the musical RENT, students at the **New Community Jewish High School** in Los Angeles unfurled the AIDS quilt they created as their annual Shabbaton Tikkun Olam project. The quilt, personalized to the memory of loved ones who had died from AIDS, was sent to the Names Project where it was displayed with over 48,000 other quilt panels in Washington. The quilt will adorn the walls of the school’s new campus opening in the fall.

Mazel tov to Darren Kleinberg, the incoming head of **Kehillah Jewish High School** in Palo Alto.


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**RAVSAK and Pardes Spearheading New Tefillah Initiative**

In collaboration with the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Israel, RAVSAK is in the planning stages of a major program supporting tefillah in our schools. This initiative grows out of the preparation done for RAVSAK’s Business Plan; informants overwhelmingly selected tefillah as an area in which they sought help and asked for RAVSAK’s guidance.

“We are delighted to partner with Pardes on this ambitious and essential project,” said Dr. Marc Kramer, RAVSAK’s executive director. “Pardes is a natural partner in this area: it has one of the strongest programs in training Jewish educators, its graduates are seeded in dozens of RAVSAK schools, it supports its graduates through visits, action research and continuing professional development, and its vision of inclusivity and deep Jewish engagement provides a great fit. Further, Pardes has already performed groundbreaking research into school tefillah upon which any project we develop can build.”

The team from RAVSAK and Pardes started the planning process by inviting people representing a range of positions and organizations, including school heads and Judaic directors, project managers and philanthropy professionals, to a think tank last June. The event garnered input on topics such as the state of day school tefillah, the purposes of tefillah education, and challenges and opportunities. Several of the articles in this issue represent work done by some of the participants at that think tank, and especially by the scholars and educators affiliated with Pardes.

In the words of Dr. Susan Wall, director of the Pardes Center for Jewish Educators, North American Initiatives, “We are excited to move forward with RAVSAK in tackling this very challenging yet critical area of day school education. RAVSAK shares our deeply held conviction that a vibrant, engaging tefillah program is essential to any Judaic studies curriculum. The collaboration with our colleagues at RAVSAK has already moved us, at Pardes, forward in our thinking as to how to make major breakthroughs in this crucial endeavor.”

Planning for the new tefillah project is well underway. Look for an announcement and rollout soon. We look forward to working with you on this important and exciting new venture in strengthening Jewish education.
Dear Cooki

I am the HOS in a community school that serves all elements in the Jewish community. As a result, I, the board chair and various committee leaders are approached regularly by parents representing left, right and center ideologies, who feel they are not fully served by our school’s religious approach.

First, I assume that your mission statement and other public information clearly indicate that your school serves all elements of the community within a diverse religious environment, and that your curriculum reflects this as well. A school that defines itself as Orthodox but accepts all denominations of Jewish families has a very different obligation. As community Jewish day schools—usually pluralistic in nature—our mandates include teaching all our students how to live meaningful Jewish lives. Defining what is a meaningful and appropriate Jewish lifestyle is difficult and personal. Our task must be to provide the concrete knowledge, the motivation, the understanding, the language and the skills, that will enable students and families to make informed choices and to live the Jewish lives to which they aspire. All Jews share a common heritage, a common language, numerous sacred texts and a history that bind us together. Start with that, focusing if it meets your needs on an intellectual rather than an ideological approach to the material.

On the other hand, do not apologize for the religious experiences that you offer. All Jewish movements are open to prayer, tzedakah, holiday observances, Shabbat, and the like. Find the common elements accepted by most parents and leave the more divisive practices or beliefs for home, or synagogue, or another time. Your Shabbat programs may need to meet some local policy or standard, but the Shabbat part should be spiritually elevating, educational and fun. Students should be able to benefit from the full tapestry that Judaism has to offer, understanding that your goal is to avoid creating any kind of conflict between school and home yet exposing students to the myriad practices within Judaism.

Parents can be a vital resource. Create opportunities to share with them what their children are learning, provide times for parents and children to celebrate together to create links between families of differing religious orientations.

We know that in this, as with so many other areas in the Jewish day school world, we will never please all of our constituents. Tension among denominations will continue, I fear, and the day schools will not eliminate them. However, we can teach greater understanding, model greater tolerance, and practice community cooperation, especially when the HOS is committed to a true community institution.

Cooki Levy is the director of RAVSAK’s Head of School Mentoring Project. Previously, she served as the longtime head of the Akiva School in Westmount, Quebec. Dear Cooki accepts questions from all school stakeholders. To submit a question, write to hayidion@ravsak.org, with “Dear Cooki” in the subject line.
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Cain’s Prayer and Abel’s Prayer
Struggling with the Challenge of School Tefillah

by Elyasaf Tel-Or Sternberg

This article provides a compelling framework for understanding Jewish prayer in all its beauty and problematics—one that can foster a deep conversation about a school’s vision and aims for tefillah.

Introduction

In many schools that conduct morning services, prayer is a rote obligation; the student tefillah mirrors synagogue prayer in microcosm. School prayer with a fixed time and language has many fine attributes, but it is important to recognize that all too often it comes at the expense of personal, spontaneous prayer emerging from the student’s heart with no fixed framework or codified expression. For example, at times when a student enters morning prayer overcome by emotion, instead of teaching him how to give utterance “from the depths I called the Lord” (Psalms 130:1), we seal his lips with the same fixed words, fluent to the mouth but foreign to the heart of the student.

Additionally, there is often a yawning gulf between the way we speak about prayer to our students and the way we have them practice it. We speak of prayer as an “experience,” full of personal and individual meaning, whereas in practice we gather students together each morning, having them sit and recite the same ancient words over and over, to the same old tunes. We tell the famous story of the child who desecrated Yom Kippur by praying with his flute, but we don’t empower our students to turn to God in their own way, to “desecrate” our common prayer—and to raise up the sound of their own unique flute.

In my opinion, the problem derives from a lack of a pedagogical discussion on this subject. Before we sit down to pray, we need to start with a conversation among teachers, and between teachers and parents, about the nature of tefillah. What do we think is the meaning of tefillah that we aim to convey to our children and students? What tools should we use if we want to succeed in realizing our vision of tefillah?

“Cain’s prayer” and “Abel’s prayer”

Two distinct forms of prayer have arisen over the course of generations in Jewish tradition. They are as alike as two drops of water, yet as different and distant from each other as east from west, like identical twins that appear the same on the surface but are completely unlike in character. Indeed, when we look inside, beyond the word “prayer” that they share, we discover that they are opposites, even opponents to a degree. Two fraternal prayers, twins, wrestling, competing: Cain’s prayer and Abel’s prayer.

Cain’s prayer stands in place, fixed, steady, like a farmer who works his land. Abel’s prayer strays and wanders, enters and leaves, ascends and descends like a nomad, a dweller of tents. The former, full of splendor, carried down from ages past, neither kneels nor bows to the human spirit. The latter, glittering one moment and the next moment vanishing like smoke, rises up and the next day withers like Jonah’s gourd in the heart of the desert, bursting forth from the human heart. These two forms of prayer alternate and struggle with each other over the heart of God and man.

The moment these two meet and converse like Cain and Abel, conflict breaks out between them, until one subdues the other. And if someone should lose one of these modes of prayer, all that remains is for him to cry out, as God does to Cain: “Where is Abel your brother?” Where are your heartfelt supplications? Or “Where is your brother Cain?” Where is the tradition and stability to balance the personal element of prayer?

In order to deepen our understanding of this conflict, we need to look more closely at the meaning of these two prayers. Cain’s prayer, namely fixed prayer, in Jewish tradition begins in the Second Temple period and the rise of rabbinic Judaism. At that time the matbe’a, the fixed coin of prayer, solidified for various parts of the service, and times were fixed over the course of a
day for people to carve out of their busy lives and to approach their Maker with words.

This ancient innovation of fixed prayer at fixed time was not universally accepted. Rabbi Eliezer opposed with all his might this revolution that his colleagues at the academy in Yavneh created: “He who makes his prayer fixed—his prayer is lacking in supplication.” Already back then Rabbi Eliezer warned that fixed prayer is drained of spontaneous, heartfelt feeling—the “prayer of Abel.”

Truly, anyone who has seen the place of God in the lives of young children can’t help but feel great apprehension at the damage caused by fixed prayer. Traditional prayer, prayer from the siddur, transforms the warm, human connection that children have with God into a technical exercise, foreign to the child’s spirit, cold and abstract. In the words of teacher Chayim Harari, from his diary written a century ago:

Yesterday morning I taught the first verse of the Torah to little children: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The little philosophers did not leave me in silence; they asked question after question: Where did God come from? How do we know that He did all this? Who saw Him? Who was watching Him work? Is it true that Abraham saw God? How come I can’t see Him? Why isn’t He here now? And voices cried out in answer: Yes He’s here, the earth is full of His glory. One joked: He’s on the blackboard! Another scoffed: He’s in my ears! I ignored the empty replies; at that moment I felt hurt, seeing God insulted, riding atop the blackboard and suspended in the child’s ear.

But I was consoled, knowing that God is close to the children: He is their friend, companion, they make Him laugh, play with Him… I thought: If I teach the children a blessing or even the most beautiful, shortest prayer, I am fixing their soul, instructing them to speak what they are not feeling and cannot feel… If the child feels a need to speak to God he can speak as he would to a friend; he can say whatever he wants to Him, he can express his thoughts…

The same is true today. The power of morning prayer, which once was composed entirely of poetry, decreases as children grow up, as prayer becomes ever more fixed and text-based. Children lose the warm innocence of speech that is direct, honest and open with God. They become stuck in thinking, as they learn in school, that the meaning of “tefillah” is prayer from the siddur, not prayer from the heart.

We tell the famous story of the child who desecrated Yom Kippur by praying with his flute, but we don’t empower our students to turn to God in their own way, to “desecrate” our common prayer—and to raise up the sound of their own unique flute.

A recent conversation I had with one of my students illustrates the way that traditional tefillah education ruins the direct connection between the child and God. One of the girls found it very difficult to pray from the siddur. I spoke to her about the importance of personal prayer and recommended that she pray from the heart. Naturally she was happy with my suggestion, happy with any proposal that would break the routine of school prayer. Right away she searched the contents of the siddur for the entry “prayer from the heart.” When she didn’t find it, she raised her glance to me and said, “It’s not here…”

In contrast to this position that glorifies Abel’s prayer over the tefillah [continued on page 12]
fixed by the rabbinic sages, one might claim the following: It’s true that prayer fixed in time, place and content muddies personal prayer, but it has an entirely different goal. According to the Mishnah in Brakhot 4:5, the sages, standing at a pivotal moment in Jewish history after the destruction of the Second Temple and the growing dispersal of the Jewish people, had in mind a completely different purpose when they created a unified form of prayer:

If someone pray standing outside of Israel—he should direct his heart toward the land of Israel...If he stands in the land of Israel—he directs his heart toward Jerusalem...Standing in Jerusalem—he directs his heart toward the Temple...Standing in the Temple—he directs his heart toward the Holy of Holies.

If this passage were not so familiar, we would be astonished at the first line: “Standing outside of Israel—he should direct his heart...” We would spontaneously complete the sentence: “to his Father in Heaven, to God!” The Mishnah teaches instead, “to the land of Israel.” The intention (kavvanah) of the heart, the honest, revealing standing before God to which prayer gives expression, here is changed to kivun, direction. If the Mishnah had only wanted to explain the direction a person should face, it could have used terms associated with the body or face. Instead the Mishnah chose the heart. The true heart of prayer is the one that turns toward the land of Israel, not toward God.

This passage represents a revolution on the part of the sages. They respond to Rabbi Eliezer as follows: “You are correct—fixed prayer is not supplication. However, from our perspective prayer has an additional aim, perhaps even more important than the feeling of closeness to God: to gather all of the people under one roof.” By making Jews say the same fixed words of prayer, the requests that concern all of the Jewish people, just like standing towards Jerusalem from all parts of the world, the traditional tefillah from the siddur came to serve as a bridge uniting us all, a replacement for our lost geographical unity.

The role of prayer is now to have people, no matter where they are, dedicate a number of minutes out of their day to escape from their “I” and to think of others. To think about the Jewish people as a collective throughout the world, about the state of the Jewish nation, about the land of Israel, about God, about everyone—just not about themselves.

In Cain’s prayer, tefillah does not at all need to flow from the depths of a person’s heart; it is not a movement from within to without, but from without inward.

This form of prayer has a profound effect upon our relationship with time. Normally time is “ours,” to be exploited for our own ends. Tefillah obligates us to remove ourselves from our routine, to dedicate some moments to something other, beyond ourselves. Perhaps this idea helps us to understand the saying of Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba in the Talmud Brakhot 31a: “A person should always pray in a house that has windows.” Namely, one’s prayer should look outside, toward others, toward what lies beyond the self. A house that is shut in is not conducive to tefillah. Tefillah does not at all need to flow from the depths of a person’s heart; it is not a movement from within to without, but from without inward.

The fixed form of prayer comprises an educational tool for absorbing values and beliefs. Tefillah is like the shaft of an arrow directed toward the heart in order to internalize faith, ethics, central mitzvot, etc. Prayer does not need to flow from the heart but to penetrate into the heart; in the words of Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary to Genesis 20:7:

Jewish prayer is the complete opposite of what most people consider “prayer.” Not pouring out what’s inside of us, not the expression of the heart’s stirrings—these we call “imploring,” “conversing” etc. Instead—penetrating the heart with the truth that is obtained from outside.

Henceforth declare: Fixed prayer is meant to rouse the heart and revive within it the eternal values that require strengthening and exalted preservation.

Prayer in school

From this theoretical discussion of the foundations of Jewish prayer, we turn our attention to prayer in our schools.

We must ask: Toward which prayer do we seek to educate our students? Do we want our graduates to leave with Cain’s or Abel’s prayer in their hand?

This question is critical for schools to answer. We often worry about the tactical questions of how much students “connect” to tefillah, or how relevant they find it. But the fundamental question remains: To which prayer are we educating our students? Do we see prayer as an educational tool for connecting students with the Jewish people and tradition, or do we focus on prayer as a vehicle for forging a personal connection with God?

These questions need to be discussed in the faculty room, among parents and the wider school community, even in conversations between teachers and students. Only with such an open and honest discussion can the form of prayer that is best for the school flourish.

Strengthening Abel’s prayer

One of my recommendations is that alongside Cain’s prayer, the traditional form taught to students, we must consider how to give expression to Abel’s
“Specifically designed to offer students entry to
Talmud study, to ask questions…”
– Rabbi Gil Student, Hirhurim-Torah Musings

“The reader… is likely to come away with more of a
sense of the Talmud as a living text…”
– Yehuda Mirsky, Jewish Ideas Daily
Teaching for Prayer

by Moshe J. Yeres

Yeres cogently argues a position contrary to the one prevailing in most day schools: schools are places that should teach prayer, not hold services.

TanenbaumCHAT, a high school in Toronto, has never had a mandatory tefillah period during the school day. The school does include some prayer readings on the school’s Yom commemorations (Yom Hashoah, Yom Hazikaron, Yom Ha’atzmaut). However, these are primarily memorial and solemn in nature, and are usually chanted by individuals. We do include set prayer at different points during our shabbaton retreats for students in each grade, most of which are required, some of which are optional (in a variety of types of services). And we include a daily period of time for prayer during our end of year graduation trip and also for other overnight school trips. When major tragedy strikes (terror attacks, military campaigns in Israel, major natural disasters), we sometimes do a prayer reading over the PA system as part of our update to students. And yet, there is no mandatory tefillah period at TanenbaumCHAT, nor has there been in the fifty years of the school’s history.

The school does hold a traditional Orthodox service every morning at each campus (followed by breakfast) before the start of classes, to which about five percent of the student body and some staff attend with a degree of regularity. Attendance is optional and is primarily from the more traditional families. There is also an optional daily Minchah minyan at the end of the midday lunch break. And the school has over the years attempted to provide non-Orthodox services both daily and on special occasions (Purim) with little student response. But there exists no required tefillah for the student body as a whole.

Visitors have at times asked for the reason for this. I do not know that this was founded on any specific philosophical and theological reason. From what I have been told, the school in its very early formation may not have included tefillah in its school day, as a way of establishing its own institutional identity as different and separate from the lower school with which it was initially connected. I do not believe that there is a deeper reason for this, and in fact it appears to have just “grown” this way, to paraphrase Topsy (from Uncle Tom’s Cabin).

Having said that, this de facto situation does highlight the paradox of institutionalizing (Jewish) student prayer at school. We can surely mandate and require students’ attendance, but we can never force anyone to actually pray. Prayer starts in the heart, not in the seat. It might be easier for a school with a narrower spectrum of Jewish identity to find a shared middle ground for specific institutionalized prayer according to a particular Jewish affiliation and practice. However, the success of our school lies not only in its size but in the diversity of its school families.

At TanenbaumCHAT, where students come from homes that range from very Orthodox to very secular, and which represent pretty much all the hues of Jewish belief/practice and non-belief/non-practice, in an increasingly large circle of Jewish inclusiveness, it is surely a challenge to build a system of school prayer that will offer in it something for everyone. Though it has been said that there are “no atheists in foxholes,” high school students do not mostly feel themselves in daily do-or-die situations of helplessness. (Those few that do are usually flagged by teachers, guidance and professional staff for personal support and counseling.) And our academically-minded students have learned that only serious study, not prayer will enable them to get good grades.

Nevertheless, preparation for Jewish life after high school should require a fluency in both basic mechanisms of tefillah and a sense of understanding for prayer. The way to achieve this—or at least set the groundwork for it—is through a well-developed course of study on prayer, which the overwhelming number of students take in their last year. While a number of topics are covered during this course, the first quarter of the year is devoted to prayer—not prayer recital and chanting, but studying and probing and discussing the roles that prayer plays in Jewish tradition and identity. For prayer to have an impact on senior high school students, the classroom intellectual approach to prayer (itself not an intellectual experience) has the ability to be successful. I am suggesting tefillah education as the way to address this necessary topic to high school teens.

The course includes a number of readings about prayer and relationship with God (which is actually what prayer is), readings by Jewish thinkers and theologians meant to develop and stimulate student discussion. The readings include excerpts from “Prayer as Dialogue” (in Besdin A., Reflections of the Rav), Abraham Heschel (Quest for God), Louis Ja...
In class we try to deal with a number of specific issues, such as the following:

Why does God command us to pray? Why does He want us to pray? Is it important for man to feel dependent on God? Is it important for man to trust Him? Is it important for man to confront himself?

Is prayer obligatory or only reserved for crises? What sort of crises?

Why has tradition identified three daily times for prayer? What does this mean about the sacrifices in the Beit Hamikdash? What does it say about my connection to the Patriarchs? The Matriarchs? About sensitivity to times of day in nature?

How did the biblical prophets pray? Were their prayers successful? Why was there a need to create a formalized siddur? Why not simply pray spontaneously? What is the structure of the Amidah, and why is it this way? Is there a roadmap for prayer?

What does prayer say about our relationship with God? Is prayer a monologue or a dialogue? Does God answer prayer? How do I know? Can prayer change us?

What is kavannah and what is its role? What is the role of meditation?

How can I feel alone with God? How is that different from feeling alone by myself? How does one travel the road on a quest for spirituality?

These tefillah education classes allow staff and students to deal with fundamental issues of prayer, but do not include actual student prayer. They help direct students to ask the proper questions and develop the sensitivity to why they—and others—may want to pray.

Still, can tefillah be taught without requiring actual mechanical reading? I have already alluded above to one response. One cannot force and mandate tefillah; one can only mandate attendance at tefillah. At best a school can offer opportunities for students to pray if they feel so inclined. I know of no school that offers a grade for actual prayer during their mandatory tefillah period; any grade or mark at best tracks students’ lack of disturbance during this period; at worst it tracks seat time.

I do not believe that community schools that require students to choose from a menu of options during scheduled required tefillah periods produce graduates with a better percentage of post high school maintenance of tefillah. Moreover, I do not accept that those graduates have a better sense of what tefillah means and is supposed to do, simply from having been required to participate in a high school tefillah period. And from what I have read, real-time student interest during ac-

How can I feel alone with God? How is that different from feeling alone by myself? How does one travel the road on a quest for spirituality?
tual required prayer periods is not exactly supportive of true prayer, in any format.

Secondly, Jewish day schools often do much better teaching texts and sources than they do teaching feelings. We excel in what I call “textus experientus”—experiencing and studying texts and sources. It matters little if these are primary or secondary sources. We have trained our students well to study, analyze, synthesize sources and readings and class lectures and notes. And schools do this well because we can quantify that knowledge and those skills through our tests and assignments and papers.

In teaching prayer, I have no aspirations (or at least not many) that my students will suddenly jump up and begin shuckling and davening as soon as they leave my class. Rather I see myself as helping probe the complicated issues of prayer with my students so that they will come to an understanding of the values of prayer. Eventually, most everyone in life reaches a situation where prayer is needed or desired: for some it may be soon in coming, for others it may take almost a lifetime. I hope that when my students reach that moment they will be able to use the values and knowledge that they have learned to help themselves navigate through it. I hope that they will have discovered the building blocks to make their prayer meaningful.

Jewish studies courses help prepare them for survival as members of the Jewish community after they leave our high school. Success in preparing our students for graduation requires engaging them intellectually in the very essence of our Jewish studies curricula. As such, the class discussions about the role of prayer may be as or even more important than the reciting of prayers in school. While we teach tefillah as a classroom subject, we teach it differently than other subjects; we aim for students to internalize its importance and meaning, and to develop their own understanding that they can apply to their lives.

When I teach students Talmud, I offer them an insight into the world of Jewish academies of yore, of intellectual battles in the batei midrash of yesterday. But I also hope that they may come away from my class with a sense of how this can be applied in their lives as Jews, of the vibrancy of halakhic process, of talmudic didactic and give and take, of the sense of scholarly jousting that is so primary to the continued living nature of our faith.

When I teach them tefillah, I feel the same. I know that unfortunately there are students who may never open a prayer book again. But I believe that a not insignificant number of students who have learnt and grappled with the issues of prayer during our course will be challenged to pursue the topic further, and that next time when they are in a synagogue, they will be able to think about why they say what the congregation is reciting; that they will recall the values of our class discussions and texts and use them as they develop their relationship with God and prayer. I believe that they will hear the echo of the Kuzari’s comment: “Prayer is for the soul what nourishment is for the body.”

I have at times wondered if we should include more experiential time in this prayer course, more reflective time about soul and spirituality and about students searching for their own inner voices. That sort of instruction requires both training and teachers who are comfortable guiding discussions about spirituality, spiritual and transformational moments. At a high school level, especially where academics are paramount, this may be difficult and somewhat challenging, though this door still beckons me.

The sainted Rabbi Chaim of Tzanz was purported to have said, “Before prayer, I pray that during prayer I will actually pray.” Our school could be said to have adjusted this to, “Before our students can pray, we engage them in the issues of prayer, so that they will learn to actually pray.”
Cain’s Prayer and Abel’s Prayer

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12]

prayer. Many schools give lip service to Abel’s prayer but in reality not much more. Here are some concrete steps to strengthen prayer of the heart in our schools.

In lower grades, when students don’t yet say the entire Shmonah Esrei, they can be taught the blessing “Who listens to prayer” (שומע תפילה) and told that here a person can add his or her own personal prayer to the formula. They can lower their heads, close their eyes and say their own prayer.

In higher grades, when they do say the whole Shmonah Esrei, it is important to continue to emphasize the place for personal prayer in this blessing. One might share the teaching from the Jerusalem Talmud that it is forbidden to read prayer as one would a letter, without introducing something new to it.

At the conclusion of prayer the teacher might request that students find a quiet place to themselves in the school courtyard, where they can address God intimately, silently, saying whatever they want to say. An example can be offered in the chasidic practice of hitbodedut, going into nature to pray alone.

A prayer-drawing studio is appropriate for younger grades when students are not yet capable of expressing themselves meaningfully in prayer. The morning can begin with a “personal drawing” in which students depict a meaningful experience or strong feeling that they have. The drawings represent each student’s personal prayer, and by engaging their peers in viewing and understanding their drawings, the students together create a communal prayer.

For older students one can create a personal-writing studio, since their power of verbal expression is greater and drawing appears childish to them. They can be introduced to personal prayers / poems written throughout the ages, and can develop their own powers of expression in a form that resembles a personal prayer.

We often worry about the tactical questions of how much students “connect” to tefillah, or how relevant they find it. But the fundamental question remains: To which prayer are we educating our students?

A melody studio (nigunim) exposes students to a large range of wordless melodies, songs and tunes that express various emotions. These would include tunes that accompany tefillah, with the goal of showing students the power that music has to give voice to the human spirit. In younger grades one might begin the morning with song, allowing them to choose which one in order to demonstrate how their choice expresses the feeling of that day. In other grades students can develop the ability to write their own melodies as a way to refine their personal expression.

Above all, conversation about prayer between teacher and students is an indispensable educational tool for developing Abel’s prayer alongside of Cain’s. For example, when a student approaches a teacher to say that he is overcome with emotions and unable to daven, the teacher can respond that for this day only he can leave Cain’s prayer, go outside and speak to God directly from the heart. Such a response makes a powerful statement about the teacher’s view of the nature of prayer.

All of these suggestions take time—time for teachers to develop them, time for schools to accept them and give them resources to succeed. Some will insist that Abel’s prayer must not infringe upon Cain’s prayer and must find time elsewhere in the schedule. Others will claim that it is essential to carve out time during tefillah for personal expression, while a third group will argue that Abel’s prayer is in fact the school’s main goal. Thus, before launching into a program that fosters Abel’s prayer, teachers and parents together must evaluate the aspirations of the school community for tefillah.

Conclusion

Prayer still presents a major challenge to our school’s educational team. The main lessons I’ve learned are that the conversation about tefillah must be shared among all stakeholders, and it must get right to the heart of the subject—the tension between Cain’s and Abel’s prayer, keva and kavvanah, fixed prayer and personal expression—and not remain on the periphery with all of the concrete issues confronting school prayer. An open, truthful search among teachers and parents, parents and students, and all together—that alone can lead to formulating a clear vision of prayer.

May we merit seeing our students realize the prayer of Rabbi Yochanan: “Would that a person might pray all day long.”

To read this article in the Hebrew original, go to ravsak.org/tel-orsternberg.

What does your school do to foster student kavannah? Share your successes at Facebook.com/ravsak.
Prayer as Transformation
A Vision of Tefillah Education

The most effective way for schools to teach and practice prayer, the author claims, is as a method of self-reflection and -transformation.

There is a problem with daily prayer in the Jewish world. Perhaps the central spiritual practice of the Jewish people is often experienced as a rushed obligation. This problem is reflected in our schools where prayer can often be meaningless and uninspiring for the students, even, or especially, after many years of practice.

This problem has been fed by insufficient and misguided prayer education. This is seen initially in its focus on skills and the siddur rather than on the transformative power of prayer itself as a spiritual practice. While skills and knowledge of the siddur are undoubtedly important and essential building blocks in developing a prayer life, they are not sufficient to make prayer meaningful and important to students and for them to create a continuing relationship to prayer throughout their lives. Anyone who wants to learn an instrument must learn and practice scales. But no one wants to learn an instrument must learn through many years of practice. Anyone who wants to create a continuing relationship to prayer is not sufficiently informed on the transformative power of prayer itself as a spiritual practice.

This approach to prayer education is then founded on two fundamental insights. First, we must teach prayer as a transformative and meaningful spiritual practice. Skills and the siddur have an important place in that educational vision, but only an instrumental one. Second, the teachers of prayer must themselves be mitpallelim who understand the practice and importance of prayer in their own lives and experience and so can convey that to their students. We believe in general that educators cannot affect truly meaningful change without working first on themselves and that this is acutely true in the case of prayer.

Moreover, prayer is taught and led by teachers who themselves do not have sufficient expertise in their field, but also to have love and passion for their subject, a passion they will convey to their students. Yet we strangely have faculty teach and facilitate prayer in day schools who have neither expertise nor passion for the subject. Effective and transformative prayer experiences and education can only happen when teachers themselves have expertise in and passion for their subject, when teachers are pray-ers, mitpallelim.

That prayer is a goal-oriented practice can be demonstrated by the core rabbinic texts concerning the nature of prayer and particularly the requirement of kavanah (see sidebar). The goals of prayer, over the course of Jewish thought and practice, have been many including receiving that which one asks for, obeying the divine command, kabbalistic tikun, communal solidarity, mystical union, self-analysis, comfort in the face of suffering and others.

Here, I would like to advocate for an educational approach that focuses on a particular goal, prayer as a technique to cultivate certain emotions, dispositions and ways of being in the world. While this is one goal of prayer it is the goal I advocate as primary for educational settings. I do so first because this is clearly a central goal in the very structure of prayer, as demonstrated by the Shema’s call to ourselves to recognize God’s unity, and by the core rabbinic texts on prayer which denote prayer avodah she-ba-ler, the service of the heart. Second,
Core Rabbinic Sources on Kavanah

Brakhot 30b

Rabbi Eliezer said: A person should always evaluate himself. If he is able to concentrate \[lekhaveen et libo\], then he should pray. But if he is not able to, he must not pray.

Bavli Brakhot 31a

Our Rabbis taught: One should not stand up to say tefillah while immersed in sorrow, or idleness, or laughter, or chatter, or frivolity, or idle talk, but only while still rejoicing in the performance of some religious act.

Tur, Orakh Chayyim, Sec. 1

Whether much or little, as long as he directs \(kivven\) his heart in his supplications. For better a little with kavvanah than much without kavvanah.

R. Jacob Emden, Siddur Beit Ya’akov, Foreword

The essence and foundation of prayer is the purification and clarification of the heart and the cleansing of the mind. Thus is the service of the heart beloved.

Mekhilta d’Rashbi 23:25

“You shall serve the Lord your God” (Ex 23:25), this is prayer. Thus it says “serving Him with all your heart” (Deut. 11:13). What is the service of the heart? Say it is prayer.

Sifre Deut., Ekev, 41

Another interpretation: “To serve Him” (Deut. 11:13) this is prayer. You might ask: Is it prayer or is it bringing sacrifices \(avodah\)? The verse comes to teach you “with all your heart and with all your soul.” Are there sacrifices \(avodah\) with the heart? Behold the verse teaches “to serve Him” this is prayer.

Mishnah Brakhot 5:1

One should not stand up to say tefillah save in a reverent frame of mind. The pious men of old used to wait an hour before praying in order that they might concentrate their thoughts upon their father in heaven. Even if a king greets him [while praying] he should not answer him. Even if a snake is wound round his heel he should not break off.

Mishnah Brakhot 2:13

Rabbi Shimon says: Be careful about reading the Shema and about prayer. And when you pray, don’t make your prayer keva [fixed]; instead make it a plea for compassion \(rahamim\) and grace \(tahanunim\) before God, blessed is He. As it says (Joel 2:13), “For he is gracious \(barnun\) and compassionate \(rahamim\), slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and he will renounce punishment.” (Avot 2:18)

Mishnah Brakhot 4:4

Rabbi Eliezer says: One who makes his prayer keva [fixed]—his prayer is not tahanunim [supplication, prayer for compassion].

Talmud Brakhot 29b

What is “keva”? 

[1] Rabbi Ya’akov bar Iddi said in the name of Rabbi Osh’aya: Anyone whose tefillah seems like a burden to him.


[3] Rabbba and Rav Yosef both said: Whoever isn’t able to say something new in it. (Rabbi Zeira said: I am able to say something new in it, but I worry that I may become confused.)

[4] Abbaye bar Avin and Rabbi Hana bar Avin both said: Whoever does not pray with the glimmering of the sun \[i.e., sunrise\].
Seeing prayer as a goal-oriented spiritual practice has profound implications for our educational approach.

The tradition is replete with techniques for the practice of prayer, including imagining oneself before the Divine Presence, mindfulness meditation, mantra practice, eye gestures, hand gestures, trembling, weeping and groaning, among others.

1. Openness / Vulnerability: the ability to feel all of what follows
2. Gratitude and Recognition of Blessings
3. Awe, Divine Presence, Wonder
4. Love, Compassion, Intimacy
5. Positive Desire, Yearning
6. Hope, Confidence, Optimism
7. Self-Worth, Divine-Nature/In the Image of God
8. Humility, Surrender, No-Self, No-Control
9. Self-Awareness, Honesty, Clarity, and teachers), or the self-love and confidence not to be nervous or uncomfortable in peer groups, the answer is much more direct and relevant to their lives.

The first step in this approach is to create educators who are mitpallelim, to train educators themselves to have a conscious, deep and transformative prayer practice. We need to introduce educators to approaches to prayer and prayer techniques which cultivate the many dispositions listed above. They must have the means to teach in a way that combines text and reflection with concrete practices and techniques.

Such practices and techniques exist throughout the tradition and can be adopted from earlier teachings as well as innovated by contemporary practitioners. Prayer as practice must first be grounded in the very structure and requirements of classic rabbinic prayer. Bowing, whis-
Each fall, the seventh grade students in my Jewish social studies class begin the year by participating in the Jewish Court of All Time online simulation. JCAT is an innovative learning adventure that is a joint venture between the University of Cincinnati’s Center for Studies in Jewish Education and Culture, the Interactive Communications & Simulations group at the University of Michigan School of Education, and RAVSAK. JCAT is a virtual trial that is moderated by graduate students and whose participants are middle school students at Jewish schools around North America.

Participants select a historical persona whom they will portray for the duration of the trial, which takes place at a virtual Masada. Students, in character, consider and gather evidence, post responses to questions and proposals and get familiar with each other’s points of view. Justices are then nominated and must gather votes of confidence from fellow participants before they can rule on the case. At the end, participants are asked to reflect on their experience and on the decision of the court. Participating schools are asked to work on JCAT two periods a week.

I began the unit by teaching several lessons about the situation in Europe related to Muslim immigrants and the wearing of the hijab by young Muslim girls. We discussed the pressure from observant or fundamentalist Muslims for all girls to wear it and related this to pressure in other religions as well for everyone to meet a certain standard of observance. We also learned about the history of secularity in France and their commitment to both freedom of and freedom from religion in the public realm. Armed with this knowledge, and a better understanding of the subtleties of freedom of religion and freedom of expression in a country dedicated to secularity, the students were ready to participate in a meaningful way in the JCAT trial.

Character selection is a tricky thing. Students all want to be someone famous and deciding for which of the five kids who want to be Anne Frank or Lady Gaga you are going to list that as one of their choices is not an easy job. Students often make the mistake of thinking representing someone popular will be easy and it is my job to help them make good choices. In a trial related to freedom of expression, Lady Gaga might be an excellent choice; in a trial about reparations to survivors of the St. Louis, last year’s topic, she might not.

Once they have their final assignment, it is their job to get to know their person well enough to be able to speak to the issues at hand as their person would have responded. Students write a “resume” or letter of introduction, as I call it, and post this online so that others can learn about their

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 66]
Understanding Tefillah

by CHANA TANENBAUM

Tanenbaum’s article implicitly argues against a “grass is always greener” view that tefillah is healthier in Orthodox schools. The problem is community-wide and knows no boundaries.

According to a 2009 Pew Research Center publication, nearly six in ten American adults say that they pray at least once a day. The frequency of prayer differs by a number of variables, religion being one of them. Judaism scored second to lowest, just slightly ahead of “unaffiliated” and nearly twenty percentage points lower than the next closest religion, Buddhism. Within the Jewish community, the assumption is that this does not hold true for the Orthodox. My research demonstrates that this is far from true.

In a study I conducted of 355 recent yeshiva graduates, all of whom were spending a “gap year” in Israel, examining elements of the school system that affect religiosity, one of the most striking findings concerned the percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement:

Tefillah in my school was a spiritually uplifting event.

Males 14.2%
Females 18.2%
Total 16.4%

Of all the activities in the school day, prayer is the one most clearly connected to religion and religious experience, yet the results of this survey indicate that the overwhelming majority of students do not perceive prayer as being inspirational. Only 16.4% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the event is spiritually uplifting, while in contrast, 20% of the same group found participation in a sports team to be fairly or extremely meaningful to their religious growth—almost 4 percentage points higher than prayer!

The first step to effecting change is recognizing that a problem exists. Results which indicate that more than 83 percent of the student body found prayer to be less than inspiring makes us question its very inclusion in the school program. The students who participated in this study were those who voluntarily chose to spend an extra year post-high school devoted to Torah learning in Israel—and even this group found prayer uninspiring. What would the students who did not choose to attend yeshiva in Israel say about their prayer experiences?

From the low scores on this question it is apparent that the schools are not successfully maximizing what should be a highly inspirational experience. Tzvi Grumet (“Creating a Tefilla Environment”) opines, “At a young age they [children] are required to perform rote reading in a language they barely understand. … The task is repetitive, and in many cases, the model set by the parents is far from exemplary.”

If this statement is true, it is no wonder that only 16% of respondents found prayer inspirational. Chaim Brovender (“Reflections on Role Models for Spirituality and Prayer in Educating Toward Meaningful Tefillah”) admits that most participants in prayer do not pray seriously. He feels that school prayer must be “special, noteworthy and very serious.” Praying seriously is difficult, and teaching others to pray is even more difficult. Most students do not know how to pray seriously, and many have little desire do to so in the present school model of prayer.

It is interesting to note despite having distinct roles within an Orthodox Jewish congregation and different experiences in the prayer service, men and women exhibit minimal difference (4 percentage points) in their attitude toward prayer. Both groups found it to be underwhelming. Perhaps this raises questions not about the external manifestations of prayer—praying with a minyan or in a synagogue—but about teenager’s ability to appreciate what Brovender calls “a natural event deriving from the human psyche.” He feels that it is a universal truth that people pray and that man has a need to enter into a dialogue with God. This message is not being understood or developed in the students surveyed. Schools are missing a daily opportunity to educate to religiosity.

In a series of interviews I conducted with 20 members of this population, only one interviewee agreed with the statement that “[school] prayer was uplifting.” She reasoned that this was “because the
administration was very strict about people not talking.” She positively described Hallel that was sung out loud. Her school had a small Sephardic minyan, that she participated in, allowing her to feel special.

Improving the impact of prayer requires schools to make a number of important changes and commitments. Financial resources, time and energy need to be invested in order to effectuate real change. It is not the purpose of this paper to solve the crisis but to awaken the community to the extent of the problem.

Grumet and Brovender list a number of suggestions to try to make prayer more meaningful in the yeshiva high schools. Exposure of students to different visions of prayer and studying its underlying philosophy and meaning, exposing students to positive role models, allowing students to be responsible and lead prayers are a few of the ideas presented. Based upon the answer provided by the respondent who did find prayer at school meaningful, schools should also consider adding the musical component to the prayer service and breaking classes into smaller, more focused groups for prayer services.

Educating to the whole student, while bearing in mind that times change and students’ needs change, may help Judaism be more successful in transmitting the religion to the next generation, an area where they are not as successful as other religions today. Of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish denominations, based on three different studies, Judaism was the least successful in transmitting the religion to the next generation (Beit Hallahmi and Argyle, *The Psychology of Religious Behavior, Belief and Experience*).

The yeshiva is a primary facilitator of religious transmission. As such, time and money should be invested in determining which elements of the yeshiva high school experience are the most effective and which need more work. Perhaps by studying which experiences are least effective, yeshivot could reevaluate and reconsider how to maximize conditions already present to be more influential in achieving the institutions’ goals.

Praying seriously is difficult, and teaching others to pray is even more difficult. Most students do not know how to pray seriously, and many have little desire do to so in the present school model of prayer.
What We Can Learn from Prayer in Christian Schools

by Sarah Levy

Despite obvious differences, there’s much that Jewish schools can learn from observation of their Christian counterparts, which have been wrestling with some of the same challenges for decades.

In her book *Prayer First*, Mary Kathleen Glavich offers teachers tips, explanations, and samples of how to lead successful and influential prayer in their classrooms. Glavich makes the case for prayer in the Catholic school stating, “If we do not teach our Catholic youth to pray, who will? Sadly, the only time some students pray is in school. Let’s give them good experiences of prayer that whet their appetite for it.”

Glavich’s words resonate within the Jewish day school world as well. After experiencing various challenges with school tefillah over the last few years in a Jewish day school setting, I became convinced that we as Jewish day school educators would be remiss not learn a thing or two (or seven) from our colleagues in Christian schools. Here are a few of those lessons that Jewish day schools can learn from their parochial school counterparts.

**Faculty should be involved, modeling prayer for the students.**

Though we all hope that what we teach our students while they are at a Jewish day school is supplemented and enforced at home, we cannot be sure that is the case with each of our students. For many students, the faculty members at the school become their Jewish role models, and we have an obligation to model positive prayer for them.

As Glavich states, “We learn to pray by praying. When the students and personnel pray, both alone and together, the atmosphere in the school is then one of prayer, and those who work in the school are giving witness as people of prayer.” She adds, “By showing our students how to pray, we show them a way to make life meaningful and full of promise.” The key here seems to be the element of praying “together” and “showing” the students how to pray. Students cannot simply be handed siddurim and told to pray; the faculty should be actively involved, modeling what to do. If tefillah is mandatory for students, it should also be required for teachers, encouraging prayer to be a communal event for everyone.

**Students build relationships with each other through prayers.**

Focusing on the Christian community, Peter Chen’s dissertation, *A Study of the Effects of Prayer on the Believer’s Relationships with God, Self, and Others*, determines a positive correlation between prayer and one’s relationship with others. Not only does regular prayer foster and strengthen a relationship with God and with religion, but it strengthens healthy relationships among people and with oneself.

Many of our schools emphasize a value on community and respect for each other. According to Chen, prayer can be a mechanism to accomplish these goals by bringing our students together in tefillah. Within the larger community, smaller groups could be formed for prayer, life events can be recognized, and personal prayers can have more meaning with the community’s voice behind them. Minyan can, and should, be a time for students to get to know one another in a non-academic setting, building relationships not only with God, but with each other.

**Prayer can help prevent our students from turning to other, dangerous outlets.**

According to John Swomley (“The ‘Power’ of Prayer” in *The Humanist*), Catholic students who attend a Catholic school and are religiously involved in prayer are less likely to drink, partake in illegal drug usage, or shoplift than Catholic teens at public schools. Through prayer, students can feel connected to greater purpose, emphasizing their connection to God and to others, and giving them options when in stressful situations.

Swomley’s study showed that being part of a religion is not enough to prevent self-destructive behavior; rather, engaging in prayer was what made the difference. Tefillah, then, can be presented to students in this manner. Instead of only an obligation to complete each day, tefillah should be viewed as an essential part of the day that involves both giving and taking through establishing a relationship. When students feel as if their prayers matter, and they are not praying in vain, they are more likely to view prayer as a viable option when they feel stressed or...
otherwise in need. Prayer is not just about service to God. Through cultivating their relationship with God, those who engage in tefillah can get something in return, including the avoidance of self-destructive behavior.

_Students should be shown variety and option for prayer._

While many of our schools recognize the value of traditional prayer options (mechitzah davening, traditional egalitarian prayers), not all students find a connection to these options, and those who do now may not forever. Gravich states, “It’s important to teach them a variety of prayer forms, so that later when their prayer tastes change, they are equipped to pray in a form that better meets their needs.” By teaching students that there are a variety of ways to pray, we teach them that prayer (and their relationship with God) is flexible and can adjust to their needs.

Although strong traditional tefillah skills like leading a service and reading Torah may be valued by some, these skills may not always help students to find a connection and deal with their different needs at different times. We should, therefore, provide students with a variety of options for tefillah that can adapt to their needs and preferences. Alternative options such as meditation, art minyan, and in-depth study on specific prayers should be offered, allowing students to explore various ways of connecting to the idea of prayer and God without feeling as if traditional options are their only options.

_Prayer must become a habit._

Regardless of whether students choose a traditional mode of prayer or an alternative option, we should help students to make some form of prayer part of their regular routine. Speaking about Catholic education in “The Importance of Prayer,” Deacon Doug McManaman says, “The most important thing is to acquire the habit of prayer. It has to become a habit.” If we engrain prayer into the students’ schedules now, it is more likely to become a lasting part of their lives. Students should be encouraged to work on their shaliach tzibur skills, aiming to be able to lead a service of their own one day. By doing so, they will not always have to rely on finding a prayer community that fits their needs as they will be equipped to make their own.

Additionally, every school’s schedule is packed with trying to balance the various needs and priorities of the school day. In order to engrain prayer into the students’ lives and create a habit of it, tefillah as a priority should be reflected in that schedule. Davening time should not be shortened or eliminated because of a special assembly or early dismissal; rather, it should be lengthened when a day such as Rosh Chodesh requires a longer service. If we want to encourage students to make prayer a serious part of their lives, we need to commit to making prayer a serious part of the school’s schedule.

_Students cannot simply be handed siddurim and told to pray; the faculty should be actively involved, modeling what to do. If tefillah is mandatory for students, it should also be required for teachers, encouraging prayer to be a communal event for everyone._
Prayer in Dialogue with Tanakh

A Novel Approach to Tefillah Education

by Elie Kaunfer

Study of the ways that rabbinic prayer borrows from and interprets rabbinic sources can make tefillah more engaging both intellectually and emotionally.

Teaching prayer to children is defined by a major challenge: How can we unlock the meaning and relevance of the ancient words of the siddur? Typically we focus on the structure of the prayers, the history of the composition, or the laws related to their recital. I propose that we shift the way in which we relate to the siddur: instead of it being a text to be taught, let us view the tefillot as poetry to be interpreted. The pedagogical framing then becomes: how do I teach poetry? It just happens that the poems are the words of the prayers.

What is unique about the poetry in the siddur is that it is in direct dialogue with another very familiar text: the Bible. Reuven Kimelman (in Kenisha vol. 1) writes about prayer: “[T]he meaning of the liturgy exists not so much in the liturgical text per se as in the interaction between the liturgical text and the biblical intertext.” (The term *intertext* refers to a source that influences the writing of a new literary work.) Kimelman argues that every prayer is in dialogue with a biblical text. By unlocking the biblical allusions in the liturgical text, meaning emerges.

While this method can be employed for almost any line of prayer, as an example I will focus on three lines in the first blessing of the Amidah.

“The God of our ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Let’s examine the biblical intertext behind this line (which the midrash in Mekhila Pisha 16 clearly connects to the Amidah). It is the scene of Moses the shepherd standing at the burning bush:

>[God] said, “Do not come closer. Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.” He said: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3:5-6)

This intertext opens up this line of prayer for interpretation. First, it is clear the main character here is not one of the patriarchs, but Moses (a figure otherwise strangely missing from the Amidah). But more important, this is Moses at the beginning of his relationship with God. He is distant from God and is wandering about in a land far removed from his people. He is so far from the Divine that God has to contextualize God’s connection to Moses in the introduction at the burning bush. The Moses in this scene is not the leader we know from the rest of the Torah, but a reluctant shepherd who is about to receive the mission and purpose of his life: redeem the people of Israel from Egypt and lead them to the promised land. Significantly, Moses does not jump at this offer, but instead “hides his face.”

Reading this biblical text back into the prayer, new layers of meaning arise for this section of the blessing. First, this line is a stand-in for the beginning of a divine-human relationship. It is the very first communication between God and Moses. Perhaps in choosing this biblical allusion for the very prayer that is said most often in Judaism, the author of the prayer invites the worshiper to see her/his relationship with God as if it were still “the very first time.” Perhaps in recognition of the difficulty of repeating the same blessing (at least) 3 times a day every day, the author of the prayer con-
to ask who he really is. While we certainly don’t have the same mission as Moses, we do have some purpose, and the quotation from the burning bush scene offers the worshiper an opportunity to ponder who they really are and what the deeper mission of one’s life may be.

This method of searching for a biblical intertext bears fruit through the rest of the blessing as well. Take the next line: “The great, mighty, and awesome God.” To the modern ear, this line feels typical of Jewish prayer: a (somewhat random) piling of adjectives in an attempt to describe God. But these are not just any adjectives, as made clear from the following story:

*There was once one who prayed (the Amidah) before Rabbi Haninah and said, “The great, mighty, awesome, powerful, strong, courageous God” [thus adding three adjectives to the standard formula]. Rabbi Haninah said to him: Have you exhausted all the possible praise of your Master? Were it not that they were written by Moses in the Torah and affixed by the Men of the Great Assembly, we would not even dare to utter those three [descriptions]! But you go on adding all of these?! It may be compared to a human king who had thousands upon thousands of gold coins, and people praised him for owning silver. Isn’t that a terrible degradation of him?” (B Megillah 25a, translation: Reuven Hammer)*

R. Haninah here is pointing to the futility of the project to describe God in human terms. Any attempt is doomed to fail, because that is the nature of the infinite Divine. Indeed, these are the only adjectives in the blessing (all the other descriptions of God are actually forms of verbs; it is much easier to say what God does than to say what God is). What is the reason one is able to use the three sanctioned adjectives? Because they are written in the Torah. This is the full context of the biblical quote used in this line of the Amidah:

*For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords. The great, mighty, and awesome God who shows no favor and takes no bribe; who does justice for the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)*

Here the biblical context of this line in prayer makes clear that this is not simply a random collection of cosmic adjectives. What does it mean to be “great, mighty and awesome” in the Bible? It means being just and ethical, protecting the most vulnerable members of society (widow and orphan). It involves concrete acts of kindness: providing food and clothing. And in case there is any doubt, the biblical context makes clear this behavior is not simply the purview of God: “You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.”

Again, a line which seemed to be a human attempt to describe God when seen in its biblical context becomes an ethical charge for how humans should treat other humans. This is not a description of God, but a subtle reminder about how one is sup-

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 31]
The author encourages schools to refine students’ lenses for reading tefillah as poetry. Just as a person can turn to poetry for meaning and inspiration at different levels throughout their lives, so too with tefillah.

Tefillah is, first and foremost, a form of poetry. The words of tefillot are arranged with the kind of intense care for words and their relationships, for intentional repetitions and rhythms, for recurring sounds and overall structure that are typical of poems. Tefillot reward the kind of close study that poems do; we can dive into them to find layers of meaning that surprise us and can resonate throughout our lives. The fact that they are so easy and pleasing to sing to arises from their fine verbal patterning.

Unfortunately, many times it happens that Jews don’t get beyond the singing. To them, the tefillot always remain little more than children’s songs. They may know the words by heart and enjoy chanting them, but the actual meaning of the words lies fossilized in the amber of the unchanging melody, inaccessible to thought or spiritual encounter. The fact that the words are in Hebrew, rabbinic Hebrew at that, is only a small part of the problem. They have never been exposed to the words themselves, to weigh them and digest them as poetry.

To the limited extent that these Jews look at the translation, the problem is only exacerbated: they see the repetition of similar ideas that sound remote from their lives; they treat the words as propositional statements—God is true, God is kind—that, whether or not one agrees with them, seem bland and boring when restated in so many ways. In short, without access to the prayers as poetry, Jewish prayer is especially vulnerable to irrelevance. I doubt that any other prayer corpus is equally invested in the poetry of its utterance. One reason why Jews more than all other faith communities have great trouble attracting its adherents to prayer, I would argue, is that we have forgotten to approach tefillah as the poems that they were written to be.

Let’s focus on one section of the Amidah, “Mechalkel chayyim bechесed, / Mechalkel chayyim bechemes,” to discover some of the rewards for close attention to the words of tefillah and the way that those words are structured to give them meaning.

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Before we launch into analysis, some general words about the poetry of prayer can help orient us. This passage and many like it aim to convey something that by definition cannot be expressed in language, the notion of God as incomensurable. God’s nature—God’s greatness, the enormity of God’s being and might—are beyond the ability of the human mind to grasp. People require ways of measuring, comparing something to something else, in order to understand things. In literary terms, this act of comparing is usually performed through metaphor or simile, although metaphor extends far beyond poetry and is basic to the way humans think. A couple of examples: a ruler measures “feet”; sticks holding up a table are “legs.” But God cannot be grasped by human language or measurement because nothing can be compared to God. God exists beyond measurement, above comparisons; people, basar va-dam (flesh and blood), are limited beings who can only understand anything through measurement and comparison.

In Jewish sources, the classic expression of language’s inadequacy is found in the Talmud Brakhot 33b, where Rabbi Chaninah reproves a prayer leader for elaborating praises of his own to God. (See Elie Kaunfer’s discussion of this passage in this issue.) Those praises that are in the tefillah we are permitted to say only because they appear in the Torah; without that license, we could say nothing. The very act of praising God is presumptuous precisely because God is beyond our ability to express anything in language.

And yet: language is the vehicle by which Jews understand and approach God. Other religious traditions confront this conundrum by adopting silence and meditation; with some exceptions, that is not the mainstream Jewish way, and it is certainly not the way of tefillah and the siddur. Instead, rabbinic tradition generally takes the opposite tack, piling language up into a vast, expansive heap. (As an exercise, a

Dr. Elliott Rabin is RAVSAK’s director of educational programs and the author of Understanding the Hebrew Bible: A Reader’s Guide. He can be reached at erabin@ravsak.org.
teacher might compare the catalogue poems of Whitman, such as “I Hear America Singing,” where a list of examples gives a sense of a greater whole. Sometimes this strategy takes the form of the alphabet, an aleph to tav catalogue of God’s praises found in Psalms such as the Ashrei and prayers such as “El barukh gedol de’ah” in the weekday Shacharit, and on Shabbat “El Adon” and “Tikanta Shabbat ratzita korbanotcha” in the Mussaf Amidah.

The idea is not that the prayer contains the “A to Z” of God; rather, the alphabetic poem conveys the sense that God is inexhaustible, that no matter how many words you use to describe God you can never possibly come close to fathoming God. Ashrei is like a ladder whose rungs collapse behind you after you run up them. Sometimes teachers ask their students to “focus on the words” of Ashrei and other prayers, and for sure it is important for people to understand what they are saying. However, it is just as important for the teacher to acknowledge that a person cannot possibly “focus on the words” of the Ashrei, by design! There are too many synonyms, too many verses expressing the same thought. The poem is meant to give the impression that God is far beyond human comprehension; the daveners begin to say everything about God so that they realize that they can say nothing, that words are inadequate.

The strategy of Jewish prayer-poetry is to explode the mind with an overabundance of words to the point where the person senses what is beyond language. The davenener is not meant to understand, visualize, internalize every word of tefillah; that scenario is rendered impossible by the sheer verbosity in a Jewish service. (Davening Shacharit means reading a hundred page anthology of Hebrew poems every morning!) Especially during passages where the words pile up (think of the repetition in the Kaddish: יתבארק жизни bechos, יתבהר וחיים bechon, יתבארק וחיים bechon, etc.), and where something similar is repeated again and again, it’s critical for teachers not to have students read the words in the normal way. To do so invites boredom, frustration and ultimately resistance.

Instead, teachers should encourage students to recite the words with a different modality: to allow the rhythms and sounds, statements and images to wash over them, to convey an impression of God’s awesomeness. In artistic terms this effect is called the sublime, when an experience takes your breath away by conveying something that your ordinary rational mind cannot grasp. Wordsworth considers the sublime as an experience wherein the “mind [tries] to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining … [or] of being conscious of external Power at once awful [i.e., awesome] & immeasurable.” Others consider the sublime primarily in experiences that evoke some mixture of terror, awe, pleasure and pain. Examples include the feelings evoked by standing near a high mountain, or looking down at the earth from a great height. Imagine each verse of the Ashrei as toeholds up Mount Everest, or waves lapping on the shore from an immense sea—how would that change our experience of it?

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The first thing to notice about this passage is that each line has a rhythm that is carefully crafted; the second thing is that the rhythm is constantly tweaked or changed, both within and between lines. This kind of rhythmic variety is typical of rabbinic prayer and diverges from biblical prayer, which is somewhat more uniform.

ヘブライ語

He who sustains life with lovingkindness, / who revives the dead with abundant compassion,

スタークール

He who sustains life with lovingkindness, / who revives the dead with abundant compassion,

Notice how the two parts are exactly symmetrical: sustains – revives, life – dead, lovingkindness – abundant compassion. In Hebrew, the form is pi’el participle, object, adverbial phrase with ב (Note as well: this is [CONTINUED ON PAGE 30]
not a complete sentence; it should not end with a period.) The word “life” in the first verset (partial verse) is picked up by “revives” (same Hebrew root) in the second: God supports life for the living, and brings life back to the dead! The two versets clearly go together as two parts of a whole, describing God’s actions in the world.

Yet they are also starkly different. To sustain the living is a gentle, behind-the-scenes activity that would easily go unnoticed or attributed to the natural flow of the world; it takes great effort to see God’s work there. Reviving the dead, by contrast, is an apocalyptic event that reveals God’s awesome might. By yoking the two together, this verse suggests that the daily, ongoing sustenance of life is a miracle on the same level as something as sudden and spectacular as the dead returning to life. A powerful statement indeed!

Who lifts up the fallen / and heals the sick / and releases the bound / And preserves His faithfulness to those who sleep in the dust—

This second verse elaborates upon the first, translating its abstractness into concrete images. Through short, vivid snapshots we understand God as active everywhere, always, the force of healing, hope and help to the living and even the dead. The first three illustrate God’s actions as “sustainer of life”; there is a progression of seriousness, from a fall to illness to captivity. As usual in tefillah, the verse shows great attention to rhythm and sound: verb – object of two syllables each, with assonance (o – ei – im). The verset showing God’s care for the dead is only one part though longer; perhaps there’s just less to say about the dead, or less that we can know. “Those who sleep in the dust” is not merely a poetic way of saying the dead; it portrays the dead as ready to wake up and shake themselves off after a night’s sleep.

King, who brings death / and raises life / and causes redemption to flourish.

The series of mem-words, the string of causative verbs (requiring two words in English for one in Hebrew) all reinforce the impression that God is the active force behind all things, the cause of life and a refuge beyond death. Note how the verbal phrases have been pared down over the verses, from three (כִּמְלָל שֵׁם אֱלֹהִים / וְרָצוּ לָוָל / וִיתֶרְאֵר) to two (כִּמְלָל שֵׁם אֱלֹהִים / וְרָצוּ לָוָל) to one (כִּמְלָל שֵׁם אֱלֹהִים), in a process of intensification: we are meant to feel God’s power ever more strongly as the passage progresses. Most significantly, this line reverses the word order. In verses 1 and 2 life precedes death; here God brings death and then life, making us aware of God’s power to overturn the natural order.

The word melech, King, is the first noun attributed to God in the passage; it is the pivot of the paragraph, the word that everything before leads up to. We should register a certain shock over it: the previous sentence suggests that God cannot be compared to anything, anyone—and now, a comparison, to a king! A king who accomplishes things that no human king can. Perhaps then the previous sentence was not so rhetorical after all. We might choose to translate as follows: Who resembles You? A king! One who brings death …

Here we are plunged back into language and metaphor. The verse returns to us a sense that words are adequate to enable us to relate to and communicate with God.

Day schools are uniquely poised to cultivate a mature engagement with prayer among Jewish students. They are places where prayer can be joyously recited regularly; where students learn Hebrew and can understand the meaning of what they are saying; where curricula can allot the time to explore tefillah in depth; where from one year to the next, students can be given the tools and creative space to grow in tefillah; where the words and concepts of tefillah can be brought into dialogue with all elements of the Jewish and general studies; where through study of tefillah and Jewish sources, students can take the time to develop their own theological understanding, to grow a deep and profound relationship to God; where students can experience tefillah as a powerful force for personal inspiration and communal bonding; and where the ancient poetry of tefillah can be translated into the fiber of students’ lives. When tefillah misfires, however, these paths for growth and connection are shut off, potentially forever. Tefillah comes to appear as part of a rigid system of commands or a childish store of fables that do not speak to the kinds of questions and thoughts of a mature, creative person in the 21st century.

Tefillah, rabbinic prayer, was written in a heightened language that must be approached on its own terms. We cannot make much sense of tefillot if we read them in the same way we read stories, essays, or other forms of writing; that effort is akin to watching a 3D movie without the glasses—and wondering why the images are flat and out of focus. We need to teach our students to read tefillot, understand them and internalize them in the rich manner that they were written. Only in that way can the words of tefillah accompany children throughout their lives as they themselves mature in wisdom and spirit.
Prayer in Dialogue with Tanakh

 posed to treat others. If line 2 was about pondering the mission of one’s life, then line 3 is about an ethical charge as the animation of one’s life.

The fundamental theme of any blessing is often found in its final words, following the formula “Blessed are You, God.” Here, those words are simply: “Shield of Abraham.” In what way is God a shield for Abraham? The expression is found only in Genesis 15.

After those things, the word of the Lord came to Avram in a vision, saying, “Don’t fear, Avram, I am a shield for you. Your reward will be very great.” But Avram said, “O Lord God, what can you give me, seeing that I shall die childless and the one in charge of my household is Damesek Eliezer!” Avram said, “Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir.” The word of the Lord came to him saying, “That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir. … Then [the Lord] said to [Avram], “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur Casdim to assign this land to you as a possession.” And he said, “O Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?” (Genesis 15:1–8).

The foundation of the relationship between God and Abraham is based on two promises: Abraham will have many offspring, and he will inherit the land of Canaan. When God encountered Abraham for the first time in Genesis 12, these promises were made outright. But here in Genesis 15, Abraham is afraid that God will not make good on these promises. Abraham questions God: where is my child? God does not become angry, but simply reiterates the promise that children are on the way. But when God renews the promise of the land, Abraham does not fundamentally believe. He asks: Lord, God, how will I know? This verse is viewed in early Jewish tradition as the classic expression of doubt in the mouth of Abraham (see Nedarim 32a).

We often think of Abraham as, in Kierkegaard’s phrase, the “Knight of Faith,” the one who was willing to sacrifice his beloved son on the altar to fulfill God’s word. However, the conclusion of this blessing reflects a very different Abraham—the one who is plagued with doubts. In many ways this is the crux of the blessing that is the foundation of the Amidah. Read with the biblical intertext, the prayer can be saying: don’t worry about your doubts. Even Abraham was filled with doubt, and he had a direct relationship with God. The project of prayer, this blessing could say, is that of holding your doubt and grappling with it, but not letting that be a reason to drop out of relationship with God.

Whether or not these particular interpretations speak to you, the larger point is that an intertextual interpretive approach to prayer yields a tremendous amount of nuance to an enterprise that, on the surface, may feel like a piling-on of praise after praise for God. The experience of prayer is greatly enhanced if the siddur is treated like so many other texts in Jewish heritage, as a starting point for interpretation rather than a surface statement of dogma. Seen as a book of poetry, with myriad allusions waiting to be unlocked, the siddur can become a thrilling text for students to study and develop their own interpretive understandings.

Prayer as Transformation

ers who themselves have a developed and systematic understanding of prayer as a spiritual practice which includes both the techniques necessary to achieve the dispositional goals of prayer and the methods to work with obstacles and difficulties as they arise.

Doing so means understanding prayer as a holistic practice which both includes and goes far beyond the saying of certain words in the siddur, involving also the body, sound, imagination, other uses of language and various states of mind and consciousness. Educators need to be systemically trained in these practices so that they can take on an educational role more akin to a music teacher, sports coach, art teacher, dance instructor and counselor than a teacher in a traditional text-based learning environment. Our teachers today, including the clergy amongst them, are almost entirely untrained in this area—a shocking indictment of our education of Jewish professionals.

After having developed their own personal relationship with prayer in the context of a broader systematic understanding of prayer, educators can then learn how to bring a meaningful relationship to prayer to their students. Transforming the prayer lives of their students will be based on this understanding of prayer as a spiritual practice and the concrete approaches and practices they have learned. Through introducing both this understanding of prayer and its concrete practice to their students, grounded in their own direct experience and insight, students will be enabled to develop their own dispositions and will experience the life-enriching effects of the practice. There is much more to say about how to do that in particular, which would include an in-depth investigation of the components of prayer, a profound exploration of the concrete practices to be taught, and the application of these understandings and practices to specific educational settings, but the key first step is providing the insight, understanding and experience to the teachers themselves, without which they cannot be effective educators and truly convey the importance and power of prayer.
Meaningful Prayer: Focus on the Goal

by Mark Stolovitsky

Keeping a concerted focus on the main purpose of prayer, the cultivation of a relationship with God, enables the contours of a program of study and practice to fall into place.

Before discussing the goal of prayer for students, we must understand the goal of prayer for everyone.

The major goal is for tefillah be a significant part of one’s relationship to God. This relationship needs to form on different levels: as individuals, as members of the Jewish people and as part of humanity. It comprises the good times and the bad, the happy and the sad; it includes events on individual, local, national and international arenas. It needs to recognize that in all the stages of life listed by Solomon in Ecclesiastes chapter 3, God is with us, wants us to lead our lives in a certain way in order to connect with Him and will call us to account for the lives we have lived. This goal is the same whether one is 6 or 80, although how one channels the messages in tefillah will differ immensely from one group to another and one age to another. Someone is sick, one turns to prayer. Israel is fighting a war, one turns to prayer. The rest is commentary.

If a school turns out students fluent in all aspects of tefillah who have no connection to God through prayer, it has failed in the ultimate goal. They might get turned on elsewhere, at which point fluency in Hebrew and tefillot will benefit them greatly. But as educators, we have lost a tremendous opportunity to send out graduates who will turn to our siddur for daily inspiration. Or if a graduate indicates that he has found his spiritual connection through Buddhism after spending many years in our institutions, we have failed in reaching the goal.

To achieve the meta-goal, one needs to develop a framework within which there are wide-ranging responses to the following questions: Why do people get sick? Why do we die? Why do both the righteous and evil suffer? What is the role of man in this world? Of the Jewish people? How does God act in this world?

To answer these questions, students need a framework that includes God and gives them tools and latitude to come to their own understanding. The building of that framework is the prime essence of all studies, Jewish and general, in God-centered day schools, whether pluralist or Orthodox.

At our school two years back, a non-Jewish lower school teacher died on erev Pesach. The fourth grade students who had had this particular teacher (both in kindergarten and third grade) discussed his death during services. While upsetting, it was handled within the framework that had been prepared for them. "Elohai, neshama" teaches us that we will eventually return our soul to God—that we all die. Students discussed the life expectancy of Americans. They knew that even though some people will die “before their time,” how we live is much more important than how long we live. The Mishnah passages studied after the morning blessings for Torah teach that we should choose to live a life filled with good deeds and mitzvot. There was general agreement that the teacher in question had led a good life replete with caring.

So, how does one set the stage? How achieve the goal? By incredible attention to detail. Here are some very simple prescriptions.

Change the lens.

The leader/teacher should show that prayers can accommodate changing events, by reading prayers as a lens upon the world around them. The themes of the Psalms and other prayers are wide enough to have different emphases at different times. During a particularly hard time for individual students or community (death or sickness in family or friends), or challenging times for our people (the war in Gaza), do we vary the inspirational message? Do we take the same rote prayer, frame it within the need of the students or group and thereby enlarge an understanding of the tefillah?

Some people and congregations err in trying to come up with new “gimmicks.” If we reflect on the role of ritual (think bedtime stories), that which is often repeated is much beloved. How do we make our repetitive prayers as comforting at the hundredth viewing of It’s a Wonderful Life? Ashrei, for example, is an oft-repeated prayer. Take the school newspaper or local or national new sto-
rieties; look at the prayer through a myriad of lenses and themes that emanate from the psalm itself and relate to current events, and through those themes, to the prayer participants.

**Develop particular goals for each student and class in the prayer service.**

The more the leader knows about the individual students, the better he or she is able to plan for or respond to their particular needs. The cynic, the rationalist and the mystic all need different inspirational messages, questions, understandings, stories or melodies. If a class loves to sing, how is that love used as a medium to clothe the tefillot with meaning? These goals need to be formulated with the individual, class, division and school in mind. Even in denominational schools, where one might be circumscribed in certain ways of approaching tefillah, there can exist a multiplicity of options.

**In traditional communities, the leader should not use the student service to fulfill the halakhic obligation to pray.**

This is a cri-de-coeur against minyanim where no one speaks or inspires students because of various halakhic strictures. The leader requires the freedom to explain, to speak, to monitor and to inspire. There are going to be students who need to hear explanations, an occasional thought, a tune to have them connect. Leaders are handcuffed if they can’t speak from Barchu to the end of the Amidah or during Pesukei deZimra. They need to daven before or after they lead and make it clear to students why they are doing so. That explanation will both reinforce the halakhic prohibitions as well as the goals of tefillah.

**Allow students to begin to own the services in whatever areas are personally meaningful.**

Because meaning is so personal, the ownership of services or tefillah means something different for everyone. For example, teachers often assume that the slow enunciation of prayers is more meaningful; however, some students may well get more out of faster davening, while others may desire even more time. When analyzing student goals in tefillah, the key question to ask is, “What does a particular child need?” How do schools respond to students who say they need more time to pray on a particular day? How do we respond if we know a child is having difficulty with his family as a result of becoming more observant? How do we help him negotiate the challenges of meaningfulness in less than optimal situations? A student begins to own prayers and services when he carves a place for tefillah in his or her life, no matter what is going on. This ownership is not to be confused with leadership, although for some students those concepts overlap.

**If a class loves to sing, how is that love used as a medium to clothe the tefillot with meaning?**

The expectations of the community should be woven into prayer and built upon where appropriate.

Community expectations are so often related to form: proper behavior in shul, knowing when to stand or sit, when to bow. While emphasis on the formal aspects of prayer does not generally speak to most students, having an aliyah or opening an ark might speak to students whose connection to prayer is the form. These are future minyan goers who have developed a connection to other people through prayer, perhaps to a feeling of community within ritual space, but not necessarily to deep and philosophical or even God-centered reflection.

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Reimagining Prayer: Questions for Teachers and School Leaders

by Susan Wall and Judy Markose

Two educators from the Pardes Institute in Israel who train and support Jewish studies teachers, provide guiding questions for leaders to grapple with as they seek to strengthen tefillah in their schools.

We are going to avoid the temptation in this article to reiterate what is challenging about tefillah in our schools. If you are reading this, hopefully you know what’s not working—or at least surmise that what is happening in your school is not ideal. Or perhaps you are already on the journey of reimagining what tefillah education could be. In either case, rest assured that you are not alone. In a recent survey conducted by Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz of day school administrators in 93 non-Orthodox schools, when asked what professional development opportunity for your teachers would be of greatest interest, “making prayer meaningful” was the number one choice. No other response came close.

What would it mean to reimagine tefillah experiences in our schools—thinking in the broadest terms, including skills, spirituality, personal meaning-making, etc.—and not only the time we traditionally set aside in our schools for actual prayer? We do not claim to have all the answers. Rather, in true Jewish fashion, we will raise questions and share what we do know, which hopefully will help you in thinking about the changes you might want to make.

Our understanding of this framework was informed by a group of our Pardes Educator Program alumni, who, in the school year 2010-2011, took on action research projects in their individual schools to explore new ways of thinking about tefillah. In asking many of these same questions, each chose a small area to explore and experiment with, which helped us to further refine our questions and understand the importance of reflecting on practice and taking first steps.

Who are our students?

This is less a question about the homes our students come from (a valid consideration we will return to) and more an issue of their age groups. We know what is possible and what is challenging for students at different ages and stages. We “think” tefillah works in the lower grades, as the students seem engaged in the singing. But they are far less engaged as they approach middle school and certainly high school. If our students were having problems with math in the higher grades, would we not revisit the foundation we provided in the earlier years? What did we do—or not do—that led us to this situation? Others have written about the importance of the seeds we need to plant in the earlier grades if we want our students to develop a sense of curiosity, awe, gratitude and “prayerfulness.”

Let’s start with examining Ralph Tyler’s four commonplaces (the student, the teacher, the curriculum and the milieu)—the four aspects that need to be thought about in any educational decision-making.

What is our end goal?

In true UbD fashion (and good pedagogic technique) we start with the vision question. What kind of “pray-ers” do we wish to produce? Do we want our students to be competent in the mechanics of prayer (how to pronounce the words, a familiarity with the geography of the siddur, when to bow, etc.)? Do we want them to be able to lead tefilot? to understand the meaning of the prayers? to find prayer personally meaningful? What about a connection to God? And finally, do we hope that they will seek out a Jewish prayer community as they grow to adulthood?

We imagine that many of you would respond yes to all of the above. We cannot argue with your vision; it is an admirable one, but we would ask if you have thought through the ramifications for those many “yeses” or even just one or two of them. Even more fundamentally, are the tefillah experiences in schools designed to meet any of these goals? What would be needed to do so?
existence of God to the relevance of the words to the purpose of prayer itself... for others the question of justice and evil raised doubts about the God to Whom they are to pray.”

In one action research study, where the teacher-researcher interviewed a number of high school students, one said that “when teachers ask us to open our siddurim or not to talk, we specifically want to do the opposite of what is being requested.” She and her peers spoke of not wanting their religious lives dictated by others. The result is what we all recognize as “student pushback.”

The greatest finding that emerged from the action research projects was that students are far more positive about and far more engaged in tefillah when they are empowered to make certain decisions and choices. Educators may question why with tefillah students should have input when they don’t in other areas. That is not entirely true as we often do give students choice as to the books they read, or what to do for performance assessments, for example.

But in tefillah we are asking for more than the acquisition of knowledge; we are asking for the students to open their hearts and souls, and that may require asking for the students to open their hearts and souls, and that may require asking for their input. For middle schoolers, the research showed that it was less about the actual choices and more about the fact that they were being involved in certain decisions (even seemingly minor ones such as where tefillah took place or what siddurim or melodies were used).

Some schools have offered a choice of minyanim—ranging, for example, from meditation to art to discussion groups. Others have offered more traditional options such as a learners’ minyan, a singing minyan or a minyan for people who want to daven. Schools need to be honest as to whether they have taken the alternative route because “traditional tefillah” has failed, and this is the next best option, or is this an attempt to differentiate for interests/ability/knowledge or for taking into consideration different learning styles or multiple intelligences? If the latter is the case, should all students be exposed to a variety of approaches?

Finally, knowing what we do about stages and ages, are some of our goals more appropriate for particular age groups? If so, then tefillah education should look very different at different stages.

Who are the teachers who facilitate and support tefillah experiences?

A teacher-researcher wrote, “One of the actions of feelings.” These teachers saw tefillah as a group, or elective? In setting our goals, which are most attainable in which type of framework? When is it most appropriate to gather as a community for reciting tefillot, and which goals are best met through a course, discussion group, or elective?

Do we have measureable benchmarks that we assess? There are schools that have a tefillah “curriculum” in terms of what prayers are included and what about them is taught at each grade level. But how do
Reimagining Prayer

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we know if the students actually get it?

Some object to tests or grades for tefillah. It is interesting that most schools do grade Bible, rabbinics, and other Judaic studies—just not tefillah. Granted, it would be unreasonable to mark them on goals that cannot be assessed such as their relationship with God (and therefore these should not be goals). But what about their skills, their understanding of tefillot, their engagement with the issues raised by tefillah, etc.: are those any less measureable than comparable studies in other classes?

Given that our students seem to graduate with very disparate tefillah skills, might we want to think about a menu of skills, so that one student might leave school as a great Torah reader, another as a shaliach tzibbur for Minchah, another with the skills to lead Havdalah or give a dvar Torah and another as an excellent shofar blower? What would it look like if each was competent in at least two or three areas, so much so that they were in demand by their synagogues? Instead we give them a little bit of everything. Are we satisfied with the results? Might it not be time to differentiate here?

Milieu

Milieu can be understood to be both about the physical space where “tefillah” takes place as well as the community that surrounds the school prayer community. Here we do need to think about the homes from which the students come, as well as the synagogues to which they do, or don’t, belong. What do we lose by not involving parents and rabbis in our deliberations?

What about the spiritual culture within the school? What and where do we help students develop an appreciation for the world around them, support one another, mark milestones in their individual and communal lives? Can we expect them to gather to recite prayers with kavanah when they do not feel safe, supported or valued in a school environment?

And where do we actually recite prayers? Is it in the classroom because we believe that small groups are best? Is it in the classroom because we don’t have a larger room? Is it in a large room with all the grades together because we believe that is the best or because we only have one teacher capable of leading? Is it always indoors because that’s the best way to do it, or do we not have the time or confidence to take them outside? Are logistical obstacles undermining our goals?

What are the first steps?

If we are serious about change, we need to bring together people who care about this, be they teachers (Judaic and general studies), parents, administrators or students. We need to ask ourselves, Who in our schools or in the community is passionate about tefillah education? What would it look like to begin to reimagine tefillah, and get the help from within or without that can lead to success in this undertaking that is so critical for the future of our students? Hopefully these questions will provide a direction.

Our Jewish sources charge us to dream and to begin the work. Granted, taking on the challenge of tefillah is a difficult and immense undertaking. Yet we tell our students constantly that when something is difficult, we must persevere. We too, as educators, need to take with us the words of Ben Hei Hei from Pirkei Avot: הבן הא—heaven speaks: לפום צערא אגרא—According to the struggle, such is the reward. May we all be privileged to begin the struggle and realize the reward.

Meaningful Prayer

[continued from page 33]

Girls who value form over substance will have more challenges in traditional minyanim where they are not permitted to formally participate: opening the ark, having alyot, reading from the Torah, or counting as part of the minyan. Boys who connect to prayer through forming the minyan see an intrinsic value to “just showing up.” In traditional communities, therefore, girls interested in “form” will need gender-specific prayer groups to achieve some if not all of their goals.

Suspend school enforcement of minor rules.

It should seem obvious that if our goal is for students to have deep connections, they are not met immediately in the morning with consequences for being “tardy” or being out of compliance with regards to the “uniform.” Getting told off first thing in the morning is a waste of precious prayer time that a student could use in the profoundly moving act of prayer. It will detract a student from the over-arching goal of prayer. The environment in which tefillah takes place needs to be a safe and caring one.

In the Gemara, the famous story is told of how God, upon hearing the rabbinic rule in the majority and against the voice of Heaven, concludes with God triumphantly saying, “My children have defeated Me.” What are the goals which will inspire our children to the level of “defeating us,” so to speak? To be advocates for prayer? To insist on prayer?

I am reminded of one story in a community school I was heading where one traditional student wanted an Orthodox minyan. After he succeeded in getting a minyan and then some (up to half the high school of 60 students by year’s end), the gabbaim of the particular minyan one day informed me that they were tired of cutting out some of the prayers just to fit into the daily schedule. That day they were going to pray without a time constraint. While I hemmed and hawed outwardly, it was a wonderful experience to have been “defeated by our children.” Those “defeats” speak to successful tefillah.
Sulam Alumni Shabbaton Inspires Hearts and Minds

School leaders both lay and professional from the four cohorts of Project SuLaM gathered together in the days before the conference for a shabbaton featuring high-level Jewish learning. The scholar-in-residence was Dr. Elisheva Baumgarten, a senior lecturer in Jewish studies and gender studies at Bar-Ilan University. She delivered four sessions on the theme of “Standing Again at Sinai: Gender and Judaism.” The learning focused on four women in the Bible and the way those women were interpreted in the Middle Ages; participants studied a nice range of source materials from biblical stories to poems, halakhic texts, illuminated manuscripts and even a gravestone. Despite the speaker’s high academic quality and the obscurity of some of the material, Sulamites found the speaker and the subject extremely engaging and relevant.

Participants demonstrated in word and deed the profound impact that Project SuLaM has had on them personally and professionally. They led services and bentsching, delivered stirring divrei Torah, and dove into sophisticated Jewish study with understanding and sensitivity. As always, they looked for ways that the learning and experience would enrich the work of Jewish education at their schools. We at RAVSAK and the entire SuLaM community offer our sincere gratitude to the AVI CHAI Foundation for their support of Project SuLaM and the SuLaM Alumni Network over the past decade. We look forward to partnering with AVI CHAI on a new SuLaM initiative; details to be announced soon!

On a professional level SuLaM provided me with the knowledge, resources and network to be a Jewish leader both at Heschel and within the Jewish community. It allowed me to model practices and behaviors based on Jewish content and make decisions with a Jewish lens. Personally, Project Sulam has changed my life. It has allowed me to connect with my Judaism.

—Betty Winn, head of school, Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School, Northridge, CA
This year’s conference demonstrated the health, optimism and vibrancy of the field of day school education. With over 1000 people converging on Washington, DC, the conference shattered last year’s record by nearly 50%! The extraordinary turnout of lay leaders, accompanying their schools’ administrative teams, testifies to the commitment that day schools have to developing leadership and ongoing learning at all levels—and the crucial connection between leadership and learning as forces that are mutually, inextricably twined.

This gathering represented the fourth year in a row that the day school agencies—RAVSAK, Schechter, Pardes and YU—partnered to pool our wisdom and resources, and the second in which we joined forces with PEJE. By now the diversity of attendees is something that people expect and look forward to, nearly taking for granted the atmosphere of klal Yisrael that is so often absent in the larger Jewish world. The conference organizers capitalized on the synergies across our diversity through carefully planned opportunities for strategic networking. The social networking consultants Weave the People were hired to survey attendees; they wove this information into attractive charts and configurations that enabled us to spot trends in the field. Based on participants’ responses, networking sessions were organized to enable people to learn from colleagues and peers.

Keynote sessions brought dynamic speakers sharing vital and creative paradigms for educational leadership today. In the opening plenary, Deborah Frieze had people moving, discussing and reflecting on the notion of leaders as “hosts” sharing leadership knowledge and responsibilities with others, rather than “heroes,” lone authority figures making decisions. Tony Wagner ended the conference with a vision of schools as incubators of innovation, a model he holds is necessary to train students for the changing nature of work in the 21st century. In the middle we were treated to a conversation on the landscape of government support and its limits in the US, featuring DC-based advocates Nathan Diament and David Saperstein in conversation with Melissa Rogers of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest.
During time for sessions organized by agency, RAVSAK members, joined by colleagues from Pardes, got to play Decision Mojo, a game-based presentation exploring the latest insights from brain science on the strengths and pitfalls of the ways that people make decisions. Led by Brent Snow, founder of 10,000 Feet, participants discussed scenarios reflecting different traps that often ensnare people making important decisions. People left with a fun, highly impactful tool for improving school leadership.
Tefillah at school can be hard work—everything from arranging the chairs to supervising a room full of fidgety, tired and often reluctant students. For those in our schools fortunate to lead tefillah, however, there emerge moments of inspiration and meaning that can make the whole enterprise worthwhile. We invited Judaic directors to distill some of those precious moments for our readers. Here are glimpses from five schools.

A Week of Tefillah Moments

By Rabbi Harry Pell, Solomon Schechter Day School of Westchester

There are two ways that a Monday morning tefillah can go in school, and for better or for worse, it can set the tone for the day, if not the entire week. The students can come prepared with tallit and tefillin, davening can start on time and with enthusiasm, the shlichei tzibbur can lead confidently, the Torah readings and aliyyot having been given out with time for students to prepare, the students can be into it, and davening can feel right and good, and maybe even with the possibility of achieving kavannah.

Or: the students can come late and unprepared, davening gets going but weakly, the shluchim tzibbur seem unsure of themselves, no one prepared the leynin, a majority of the students can seem disconnected, davening feels like a chore, or worse, and kavannah seems like a faraway dream. Truth be told, most of my Monday mornings are somewhere in between, usually closer to the former than the latter. But it takes only a few mornings when tefillah does not go well for me to question the entire enterprise of tefillah in school.

One recent Monday senior minyan most certainly embodied the second of these scenarios. The toranim never gave out the Torah readings, the kids trickled in after the bell, davening felt weak and distracted, and I remember leaving feeling frustrated, especially in the knowledge that I would be davening with the same group of seniors that Thursday. It is moments like these when I wonder, as confident as I usually am about the importance of the tefillah experience for our students, is it really worth it? That was Monday.

On Sunday, an email had gone out to our teachers and alumni that one of our alums, a former student of mine, had lost his father. The circumstances were even sadder: the alum was an only child, he had lost his father to pneumonia, and his mother had also become ill and was still recovering. He had been the only member of his family at his father’s funeral, and he was now sitting shivah essentially alone as his mother recovered upstairs. To give his mother time and space to recover, they had even declared it a closed shivah, with the exception of the minyanim.

When I arrived for Ma’ariv, I wasn’t sure what to expect; the house was quiet and I wondered if they would even get a minyan. Very quickly, though, the living room filled up with fellow alumni who had come to comfort their classmate. When my former student led Ma’ariv, he did so from a place of loss, but also from a place of comfort and pride. Moreover, his classmates had used the occasion of the minyan to surround him with their love and support as they joined him in prayer. That was Tuesday.

Wednesday night was the school’s annual poker night fundraiser, and not being much of a card player, I spent the night schmoozing with parents. One parent, himself a day school alum and a significant supporter of the school’s Judaic programming, shocked me when he said, “Rabbi, you would have hated me in high school!” Why? I asked. “Because I was the kid in
minyan every day with my tefillin bunched up at my wrist like I couldn’t care.” Hate is a bit of a strong word, but I certainly recognized the type. And yet now he was not only sending his kids to day school but funding initiatives to enrich Jewish life and tefillah. That was Wednesday.

Thursday morning, I was back with the seniors; things were much better than Monday, but still far from perfect. Yet as I looked around the minyan, I couldn’t help but reflect on the moments I had had since our tefillah on Monday. Would these students someday use tefillah to rally around a friend in a time of need? Would they have to put their tefillah skills to use at a shivah minyan of a loved one? Would one of the jokers who gives me a hard time about wearing tefillin properly eventually come to embrace tefillah and want to make sure others have the benefit of it as well?

I can’t say for sure, and only time will tell, but I certainly left tefillah on Thursday with a far more positive outlook than I had had just a few days earlier. As it says in Yirmiyahu: Yeish tikvah le-acharitekh—There is hope for the future!

Absence and Presence

By Peg Sandel, Jewish Community Day School of the Bay

“The Kaddish yatom, the mourner’s Kaddish. All those who mourn and those observing a yahrzeit, please rise.” When I heard the rabbi utter those words, I thought, “Oh God, now it’s my turn.” I stood up and within a moment the words flowed from my mouth, at once with a choked, emotional stutter and yet with fluidity: Yitgadal ve-yitkadash...

I said Kaddish every day for a full eleven months for each of my beloved parents. My mother died rather suddenly in 1998. My father died in 2010 after a long and inspiring struggle with Lou Gehrig’s disease. Each time, my relationship to this prayer, to my commitment to say it daily, to my parents and their memory, as well as to Judaism changed.

Over the course of those eleven months I felt my grief slowly begin to subside. Yet when the eleven months were over, I found it hard to let go of Kaddish. Saying Kaddish had allowed my parents to be a continuous “presence” in my daily life even though I could no longer hear their voices or touch their hands. One thought, however, never changed: Kaddish is something everyone participates in. Today you may be the one saying amen; tomorrow, you could be the one saying Yitgadal ve-yitkadash.

The second time I said Kaddish, the experience was vastly different. I was now a teacher and had two daughters of my own. When I said Kaddish for my mother, I wasn’t aware of myself as a role model. This time, I was mindful that I was modeling the importance of Kaddish for my daughters and my students. I chose to say Kaddish daily in the student-led egalitarian tefillah at the Jewish Community High School, where I teach.

A truly transformative thing happened in this minyan. For the three months prior to my father’s passing, our egalitarian minyan wasn’t a minyan. We only had about eight people, and so we davened together without a minyan. Each day we concluded our prayers with a Mishe'beirach for cholim. At various times, we shared with each other those we included in our prayers for a refuah shleimah, including my father.

The call and response, the public nature of Kaddish are part of what makes saying these words so powerful for me. Kaddish brings us together so that we can remember that some of us are missing. It is a profound weaving together of absence and presence. The mourner represents the absence, while the minyan represents the presence.

When he died, I didn’t go to work during shivah, and this happened to coincide with our school’s tefillah sign-up time. To my surprise, the egalitarian tefillah swelled with students. Students joined the minyan simply to allow me to say Kaddish for my dad. This had a profound impact on me. I had shared with my students my teaching that it is as important to be there for someone saying Kaddish, as it is to say Kaddish when your turn comes, as it unfortunately inevitably does, and it was truly gratifying to see that they had internalized that message.

Saying Kaddish with students heightened my awareness of absence and presence. When I said Kaddish for my mother, it was her absence that Kaddish pointed to. This time, with children and students in my life, my Kaddish pointed to many absences: my father’s and those future absences whose voids will fill the lives of these young people.

We often say to those who grieve, “May the memory of your loved one be for a blessing.” Saying Kaddish with students refracted that blessing tenfold. The blessing of Kaddish is the memory of beloved parents, their painful absence, the presence of community in minyan and the modeling of this mitzvah to a younger generation who are already taking responsibility simply by being present.
Olami: Stories of Tefillah in Our Schools

Tefillah as a Journey, on a Journey

By Rabbi Yoseph Chaiton, Portland Jewish Academy

Tefillah, I believe, is a journey into yourself. It allows me to get in touch with the very core and essence of my being, the pure spark of the Divine, חלק אלו-ה ממעל
ממש
—“a part of God above” (Job 31:2), that is within every single Jew. Tefillah is the time and tool to connect with Hashem as is experienced within nature and Hashem that transcends nature. Hashem that we experienced as the “loud voice” at Har Sinai and the quiet voice we struggle to hear in the clutter of noise in our day-to-day lives.

Over the years I had the opportunity to take students on weeklong camping experiences to the many beautiful parts of Oregon and Southern Utah. These trips require a lot of detailed planning in advance and many long hours of supervision of the students. One thing that makes it worthwhile for me is early in the morning before anyone wakes up I find a quiet spot with a view of a still lake, a majestic mountain or an open field. It is so quiet and peaceful that you literally hear the birds fly. Here I find the tranquility to don my tallit and tefillin and daven Shacharit. The tefillah is meditative and refreshing; I try to capture and keep this feeling with me when I return to the busy life of home. This is Hashem experienced through nature.

I also have the privilege to accompany students on a journey to Israel. As part of our itinerary we spend the night in a Bedouin camp south of Be’er Sheva. After nightfall we walk outside the campsite. Instead of a formal Ma’ariv service, students are asked to sit on the sand and allow their eyes to adjust to the darkness. Away from light pollution the sky soon fills with more stars than we can count or imagine.

I ask the students to pick up handfuls of sand and allow it to run through their fingers. I explain to them that somewhere not far from here Hashem told Avraham to step outside his tent—to leave the confines of nature. Avraham was promised that his descendants, you and me, will be as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sand of the earth. Light leaving the stars then would in some cases be just reaching Earth today. We sitting here today are looking at the same stars that Hashem showed Avraham. In the interim time how much we, bnei Yisrael, have experienced is miraculous in its own way. I explain that we can tap into these miracles, these transcendent energies of Hashem. We conclude the evening by saying the Shema, but with a new devotion.

Student Prayers for Sandy Hook

Brandes Hillel Day School, San Francisco

After the shootings in Newton, Massachusetts, many of us were feeling devastated and helpless. As the days after passed, our 6th and 7th graders were clearly still emotional about the event. Their teacher, Samantha Zadikoff, knew she had to respond, but did not want to have a full blown conversation focused on the details of this tragedy. Instead, she turned to prayer. “We looked at everything from Miserbeirach to Hatikvah and really delved into the meaning and structure of Jewish and secular prayer. As a response, students wanted to write prayers for victims, families, children and the country.” We spoke about how powerful this spontaneous lesson was, and a couple of the prayers that emerged were really exceptional.

After our conversation, I continued to think about the idea of “needing to pray”—those specific moments in life when you are overcome with emotion and don’t even know how to respond in any other way.

Perhaps what was most striking was that as Jewish educators, we work so hard to plan and create moments for the kids to get a sense of what prayer is all about, but in the end, it is almost always in the unplanned lessons that our kids experience it for themselves. —Sarah Miller, Director of Jewish Life and Learning

Prayer for Peace

Adam Teich

When we’re down in the dumps all alone, give us peace.

When the seeds on our land have finally grown, give us peace.

When we lose a person that we love, give us peace.

When we need your guidance from above, give us peace.

When we cry out in a prayer of joy, give us peace.

When sometimes we feel like we’re merely a boy, give us peace.
Prayer for Peace

Zoe Neushatz

May we be at peace with ourselves
May we think peace in our thoughts
May we be at peace with our souls
May we have peace in our dreams
May we love peace in our hearts.

May we speak peace with our friends
May we speak peace with our families

May we speak peace with our beloveds
May we learn peace from our elders
May we teach peace to our children.

May we be at peace in our homes
May we be at peace in our cities
May we be at peace in our country
May we be at peace with our continent
May we be at peace with our world.

Why Pray?

By Sharon Freundel, Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation’s Capital

Seven years ago, a kindergarten teacher brought a student to my office. The children were supposed to be davening, but this young man, whom we shall call Gavi, refused to participate. This had been going on for a few weeks, and the teacher was now turning to the administration in an effort to get the student to comply.

As always, I began by asking the student what was going on and why he did not want to pray. He explained to me, in adult terms, that he did not believe in God, and therefore saw no reason to pray.

I was not caught completely off-guard, as I had had many conversations with Gavi’s older sister—herself a 3rd grader at that time—about the existence of God. The two were very close, and I was not surprised that Gavi, also, was now questioning the existence of God.

Gavi, even as a young child, reveled in shakla ve-tarya, the thrust and parry of intellectual dialogue. I did a quick mental calculation and decided that engaging in a conversation about the existence of God was not the way to go.

Instead, I told Gavi that I respected his intellectual view that there was no God, but that there were two cogent reasons for him to learn how to pray and to engage in it with his classmates.

First of all, we could disagree about the existence of God, but it was impossible to disagree about the existence of the Jewish people and their long tradition of prayer. Even if one did not participate for religious reasons, one needed to participate out of respect for the community. Jewish culture and the very heart of Jewish civilization would fall apart if there were not some kind of routine community activity, and in our school as in the larger Jewish world, this activity often involved tefillah.

Further, I questioned, what would happen if he changed his mind down the road and decided that there was indeed a God and therefore wanted to pray? He would not know what to do or how to do it unless he received the basic training which begins in kindergarten.

He sat there for some moments, finally looked at me, and said, “You’re right. I’d better learn how to daven just in case and to be a member of the Jewish community.” (Remember, this is a conversation with a kindergartner.)

Fast forward 6 years. Gavi decided that his sister was wrong, that there was a God, and that it was really meaningful for him to pray in the morning as it set his head straight and clarified his place in the universe. He became not only one of our regular prayer leaders, but a true role model for the other students.

Before he completed his academic life at JPDS-NC, he came to me and thanked me for making him pray in kindergarten and for not making the issue about God. He said that, if I had made it about belief, he would have dug in his heels and continued to refuse to pray. The logical arguments I made went beyond any belief system; he took them as pragmatic pieces of advice (yes, in those words) and could respond by backing down from his rebellion.

The good thing about this story is that it has a happy ending. The frightening thing about it is that everything we say and do may have an impact on a child that he or she remembers long after we have forgotten it. Hence, the tefillah in Shulhan Arukh Orach Chayyim 110 that Hashem should save us from “all stumbling blocks and errors” when we deal with young people in our charge.
There are a variety of techniques that prayer leaders can use to harness student energy and focus their attention on tefillah. This article describes one powerful method: storytelling.

It’s 8:00 am and the students surge into the beit midrash of our school. The students are relaxed, happy, and content; there are no grades, homework or assignments expected. The students don’t have to take notes or worry about their agendas or deadlines. They just have to be sixth, seventh and eighth graders. They seem to enjoy this different status in a controlled environment.

Then the tefillah challenge begins. I am faced with seventy-five students, some staring and waiting with anticipation, some filled with curiosity, and others having that early morning “spaced out” glare and uncertain apathy. In their hands they are holding the siddur, a book compiled of sections and readings from our sacred literature: the Tanakh and the Talmud. The order of these prayers is the creation of our divinely inspired prophets and sages. In their hands they hold the infinite word of God.

They look to me as their rabbi, teacher, and maybe philosopher. I am aware of the responsibility that my actions and ethics must convey meaning. The young people look to me for guidance and example via my transmission of meaning and hope. How do I maintain this potentially good atmosphere? How do we make the siddur that has endured with us over thousands of years still relevant? How do we make the siddur that has endured with us over thousands of years still relevant? How do we make the siddur that has endured with us over thousands of years still relevant? How do we make the siddur that has endured with us over thousands of years still relevant? How do we make the siddur that has endured with us over thousands of years still relevant? How do we make the siddur that has endured with us over thousands of years still relevant?

Reb Mendel would sum up the main objective of the lesson in a story. Through a well-told tale, he made a bridge between his messages on an intellectual level to the actual level of experience. Cognitively, one can teach the divine traits of compassion, sincerity and heart. Actually conveying this to the student on the emotional level is much more difficult. A story can help one identify with the experience, “feeling” the teachings even more than “understanding” them.

Reb Mendel would say, “There is a Torah of parchment and ink and there is a Torah of flesh and blood, and the latter is what the stories are.” He would tell us to take all these stories and put them into some kind of a freezer in our minds, taking them out to defrost with the warmth and enthusiasm of our words. Reb Mendel would say that a story has the power to reach out to the listener and communicate ideas of greater depth and profundity than are to be found in any other form, whether in the realm of Torah or even in its hidden mystical aspects.

I decided to use my “freezer-full of stories” in the tefillah class. The results were astonishing. The body language of the students transformed from blank stares and restlessness to leaning forward and actively engaged. I could feel and see the magic of storytelling at work. With the students’ interest rekindled, we would revert back to tefillah. This time there was a difference. The routine of saying the prayers by rote or mechanically seemed to fade away.

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I could see the story do its work. It opened up closed places and it awakened the students’ imagination as the kavannah of the tefillah took form. The students were able to understand how the character in the story was strug-
In the morning blessings, Birkhot Hashachar, the first brakhalah says, “Blessed are You ... Who gives the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night.” At a glance this blessing seems strange and begs the question, “Why do we start the day with a blessing over a rooster?” Normally we should have to make this blessing only when we actually hear the rooster crow, just as we make similar blessings when we see or hear any phenomenon—thunder, lightning, a rainbow. One must always strive to see God’s hand in every one of the wonders of nature. Therefore we praise God for giving the rooster the understanding to sense the breaking of dawn and automatically crow. However there must be a deeper reason.

Day and night, light and darkness, are synonymous with good and bad, knowledge and ignorance, happiness and misery. The Hebrew word for the rooster in this blessing is sechvi. The Talmud tells us that this word also means heart. The heart is the seat of feeling and understanding. Now, while God has given the rooster a special sense to distinguish between day and night, He has given man a special sense to distinguish between good and bad. For God has endowed man with a Divine Soul which enables him to think and to feel what is right and what is wrong.

Here is the story:

A ruler in Spain by the name of Saladin was arguing with many of his advisors of whose religion was the true one. They called a Jewish scholar named Ephraim Santizi to decide who was right. They said, “Tell us, who has God’s true religion: the Christians, Muslims, or Jews?” Not wanting to shame anyone, Ephraim thought deep and hard, and answered by telling this story.

There was a large and precious ruby that had a wonderful power. Whoever held it close to his heart found that his life was blessed with kindness and understanding. It was owned by a jeweler who cut and polished it so perfectly that everyone was astonished by its beauty.

The jeweler had three grown sons. Each one wanted the ruby more than anything else. The time came for the jeweler to go on a long journey. Each so begged him for the jewel. As he was about to leave, the jeweler met with each son separately. He gave each one a ruby, saying, “This is for you and for you alone.” When he was gone, the three sons were surprised to see that the three rubies looked identical. They said, “Our father must have owned two other rubies. He cut and polished them to look exactly like the true one.”

Each one claimed that he had the true jewel and that the other jewels were false. They argued and accused each other of lies and trickery. Finally they went to a judge and told him the whole story. They then asked him, “Which is the true jewel?”

The judge studied all three rubies, but he could not see a single important difference. Finally, he said, “I cannot tell you. Only your father knows the answer.” The sons were deeply distressed. They were about to leave when the judge spoke again. “I can tell you how to prove that your jewel is not a false one.” “Tell us!” They begged.

He told them, “Whoever holds the true jewel close to his heart finds that his life is blessed with kindness and understanding. Live your life in such a way that you always act with kindness and understanding. Then the whole world will say that your jewel cannot be false because your life is truly blessed.”

When we recite the blessing “Who gave the rooster the ability to distinguish between light and darkness” we must reflect on this story and ask ourselves if we are worthy of the gifts that Hashem has given us. Are we living our lives with a true understanding heart?
What We Can Learn from Prayer in Christian Schools

Students can become better citizens of the world through prayer.

Prayer may focus on one’s relationship to God, but it teaches much more. According to the Catholic News Agency, Bishop Robert W. Finn emphasizes that Catholic schools are “about the formation of men and women in all aspects of life and living.” He stresses that through prayer in schools, students come to know and appreciate God’s presence, eventually leading to their becoming better people in society. Glavich adds that through prayer in school, “We help them realize that there is someone beyond us who is all-powerful, all-wise, all-just, and all-good, someone who makes sense of the universe. Then our students are more equipped to become good citizens of earth and heaven.”

Prayer teaches students to be humble in recognizing power above them. It encourages students to think about each other through communal prayers. It gives them a moment each day to focus on those less fortunate, all helping them to become better citizens of the greater world. Additionally, minyan can be a wonderful opportunity for our students to develop leadership skills. Students can be given responsibilities in the individual prayer communities and taught that if they do not uphold their responsibilities, they will be letting down the entire community. Students should be encouraged to lead minyanim and personalize the service to reflect their needs and community while still serving the purpose of the minyan as a whole.

Prayer cannot be limited to morning minyan.

Many of our schools build morning minyan into the school schedules, but to be truly beneficial and powerful, prayer has to go beyond that slotted time. Beth Nolen, in her article “Prayer Strategies for Christian Schools,” underscores the need to teach students that prayer is in response to a need, not merely as an obligation tied to time. She discusses the opportunities for prayer such as at times of sharing good news, when fights have passed, and when a fellow student faces an illness. Nolen feels these are all appropriate times for prayer “because there is a need for students to stop and become aware of the presence of God within them and who God is calling them to be.”

Judaism is filled with opportunities for prayer. Blessings before and after eating, after exiting the restroom, upon experiencing something for the first time, and more are already provided for us, and there is no limit to the prayers that the students could write for themselves. In order to be a truly transformative experience, the school should be saturated with prayer. The cafeteria should have Birkat HaMazon prominently displayed. Asher Yatzar can be posted outside of the bathroom. The blessing for seeing a rainbow can hang near a window. The opening of the school year should include reciting of the Shehechiyanu. Through constant infusion of prayer into students’ daily lives, they will gradually work to cultivate a relationship with God beyond morning minyan.

In order to be a truly transformative experience, the school should be saturated with prayer. The blessing for seeing a rainbow can hang near a window. The opening of the school year should include reciting of the Shehechiyanu.

Glavich explains, “A school is not Catholic just because it has religious classes. That would make it little different from the public school down the street. No, the whole school should be saturated with a sense of the sacred.” Prayer is one of the many aspects that allow a Jewish day school to differentiate itself from other educational institutions and, hence, should play a vital role in the school. Glavich adds, “Prayer is as essential to the spiritual life as breathing is to physical life.” As such, it should play an essential role in our schools, reaching beyond morning minyan, becoming a habit for our students, and helping to shape them into the people we know they can be.
Storytelling: Inspiration for Kavannah

[Continued from page 45] interest and momentum going. Other days I would just tell the story at the end. If the story was working well, I would leave it unfinished, building anticipation for the next day’s tefillah encounter. The students would leave on a positive note saying “Rabbi, you have left us hanging by our nails! It’s such a cliffhanger!”

I must tell at least 300 stories a year. The rewards are priceless. Alumni enthusiastically say to me, “Rabbi, the one thing I remember most from my school days are those stories you would tell at tefillah.”

The best feedback comes from meeting former students who tell me that they are sharing the stories with their children. Some of my students have become teachers themselves, and they contact me asking for the same stories for their lessons. I feel that the stories enhanced the quality of the students’ overall school experience.

I heard the following from a very effective teacher, the well-known educator and consultant Dr. Harry Wong.

“Storytelling can enhance and inspire.”

The holy Rizhiner rebbe said, “How does the Torah, the five books of Moses, start? With the Master of the World telling us stories.” Before God taught us all His laws, statutes and judgments, He started first by telling us stories. A good story during tefillah has the power to raise the students to a higher level. It can give inspiration and strength.

I am not in the restaurant business. I am in the hospitality business.

I do not sell clothes. I dress successful people.

I do not sell insurance. I help people solve problems.

I do not teach history. I teach students.

I do not teach third grade. I enhance the quality of lives.

Stories don’t need to be conveyed exactly like the words of the text. Stories have many layers of meaning. One can play with them, turning them inside out to discover all the hidden messages.

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The Global School Twinning Network includes over 425 Jewish schools around the world, and is part of a family of programs in The Jewish Agency’s Partnership2Gether (P2G) Peoplehood Platform.
Maayan confronted parents with hardened and conflicting expectations about school tefillah. Her efforts to collaborate with them and forge a new practice of tefillah acceptable to all speaks to the diversity in all our schools.

“You have too much kavvanah at Mirowitz.” Just the other day, I heard these words from a parent at my school who is unsettled with the changes in tefillot that have resulted from the school’s recent merger. Behind these words lies an issue that is paramount to the development of our young school.

Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School was born this year, a product of a venture marking the first instance in which Conservative and Reform day schools have merged. The new entity is envisioned as a pluralistic Jewish community school, primarily serving the Conservative and Reform communities of St. Louis.

“My children complain about all of the kumbaya at Mirowitz,” another parent boldly stated. By contrast, a third parent complained to me that since the merger, the joy in tefillot has been diminished, and her child is generally bored during services. “What happened to the warmth?” she said. Yet another parent complained: “Why don’t they sit on the floor like they used to? It was so cozy that way. It’s a shame that the whole school doesn’t pray at one time anymore.”

These opposing attitudes exemplify one of the many challenges facing our community as we work to build this newly joined institution. The comments expressed by these two groups of parents illustrate what I refer to as “the keva-kavvanah conundrum.”

Bringing together families from various backgrounds to pray together is an issue at the heart of our merger. We continue to work closely with our parents, trying to understand their emotions, comfort levels and desires for prayer at Mirowitz, while building a program that will engage their own children in prayer for life.

**Background**

The challenge at Mirowitz stems from our deep-seated goal of exposing our students to tefillot in the styles of both of our legacy schools. We are committed to creating a community in which every student not only becomes comfortable with both a Reform and Conservative style of service, but also can find meaning in the variety of traditions. It is our hope that they will never walk into a shul or a temple and feel like a stranger, or feel that another Jew’s tradition is any less Jewish than their own.

Unfortunately, these goals are precisely the root of our conundrum. Along with the general apprehension toward change of any sort that has accompanied our transition this year, a theme has emerged that is at the same time fascinating and troubling. It would appear that many of our families view kavvanah as primarily a Reform value, and keva as predominantly a Conservative value.

One might surmise that our keva-kavvanah conundrum is simply our parents’ desire for our day school tefillot to look, sound and feel just like worship services at their own synagogues. It may seem that parents are simply resistant to change and uncomfortable with the “other.” I believe it is more than that. I believe we are struggling with a small

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**The Keva-Kavvanah Conundrum**

Prayer in a Newly Merged School

by Cheryl Maayan

Cheryl Maayan is the head of Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School in St. Louis, Missouri. She can be contacted at cmaayan@mirowitz.org.
identifying anything that leads to feelings of connection to God (and to others in their community). This includes the traditional definition of kavvanah, but also has come to include other ways of creating these connections: trying out different tunes, having guitar music, stopping to discuss the meaning and intent of the prayers, even just having a cozy atmosphere or swaying together. The use of the term kavvanah in this conversation refers to our emphasis on taking the time to create spirituality, even if it means not finishing all of the prayers by the 9 am ending time.

Tefillot at Our School

In an effort to reap the benefits of both of these styles, tefillot at Mirowitz are slightly different each day of the week. We developed the tefillah model for our new school after surveying many other existing Jewish community schools. At most community day schools around the country, a typical program includes a Conservative service on all but one day a week. This special day is often called “alternative tefillot day.” At Mirowitz, we felt that the best way to retain equal respect and build comfort was to make both the Reform and Conservative traditions part of our regular program, not as “alternatives” to it. On Mondays and Wednesdays, some of the tunes are more reminiscent of those you’d hear in the local Conservative synagogues and we say mechayyeih ba-meitim, God revives the dead. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the tunes are more reminiscent of what you might hear at summer camp or a Reform synagogue, and we say mechayyeih ba-kol, God brings all things to life.

A Broader View

But when did kavvanah become kumbaya? And has there ever been a value placed on keva free of kavvanah?

A publication of the Solomon Schechter Day School Network written by Dr. Saul Wachs clarifies that it is certainly not a value of the Conservative movement to choose keva entirely over kavvanah. In “Towards a Theory of Practice: Conducting Services for and with Children and Teens in Jewish Day Schools,” Wachs advocates for omek, depth: “When tefillah consists of skills and little more, there comes a time when, for many pupils, skills no longer reinforce themselves.” Young Jews must feel a deeper connection with the meaning of prayer and its potential influence on their lives.

Learning from General Education

As an educator, I see parallels between our keva-kavvanah conundrum and developments in secular education in America. Over the last half-century, we have come full circle in math and literacy education in this country. We experienced an era of throwing math fact practice out the window for the higher purpose of building conceptual math. We remember the days when the teaching of phonics was thought to be misdirected and outdated, and cast it aside in favor of a vehemently philosophical whole-language approach. Those of us who have been around long enough remember our passionate conviction about conceptual math and whole language as the wave of the future. We also remember our guilty realization that, indeed, children need both facility with concept and fluency with fact, the rigid keva of phonics together with the kavvanah of whole language.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 53]
Creating Community through Tefillah, Tefillah through Community

by AYTAN KADDEN

Based in an Israeli school that includes students who identify as both “religious” and “secular,” the author describes how the school has created a tefillah experience for each group.

As dawn breaks over the Judean Desert parents and children are slowly wending their way to Ein Fu’ar, the spring which lies beneath Kfar Adumim. It is nearly 6 AM on one of the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the fifth grade, their parents and teachers have gathered for a unique selichot experience. The rav bet sefer (rabbi-in-residence) welcomes the group and invites everyone to appreciate the majesty of the hills surrounding the spring.

For the next hour, students, parents and teachers will join together praying the ancient piyyutim (religious poetry) of the selichot, sharing stories from newer and older traditions, and singing modern Israeli songs on the theme of beginnings, change and prayer. The morning continues with tefillah for those inclined and Siach Shacharit (morning conversation) for those interested in a unique discussion about the new year.

This magical hour has become an annual tradition in the Kfar Adumim Experimental Elementary School (grades 1-8; “elementary” in Israel traditionally went to eighth grade). The excitement and success surrounding this event can be proven by the simple fact that grades 4-8 have each found new venues for similar selichot as well as new experiences to expand the basic concept. Behind each new attempt lies a common theme: community as a core expression in tefillah.

Parents, children and teachers are drawn together and a sense of a community is formed.

The Kfar Adumim Experimental Elementary School was founded in 1980 as an institution that would raise and educate religious, traditional and secular students together to respect and learn from one another. In the Israeli education system, state run schools are forced to define themselves as either religious or secular. Families who prefer a more nuanced view of Jewish Israeli society often find themselves without a school that reflects their beliefs. As a response to this bifurcation, the initial mandate of the school was to bring together students from families with different backgrounds to learn to tolerate, respect and value the other.

During the last several years the school has been investigating and experimenting with a new question: Beyond simply living together, how does our shared life influence our Jewish experience? Through the Ministry of Education’s experimental wing, we received a grant to study the impact that our joint life has on our shared spiritual life. In a team spearheaded by principal Amira Perlov, over the past several years we have investigated this issue through study, community service and shared experiences related to the Jewish calendar. Most recently, we have begun to investigate how tefillah can be expressed in and enrich a mixed community school. As we strive to define and create an appropriate expression for tefillah in our school, we have come to recognize and rediscover the centrality of community in tefillah.

Tefillah, Jewish prayer, has always been seen as a communal experience. The original authors of the Amidah made certain to express the prayer in the plural form, as the amora Abbaye says: “[In prayer] one should always connect oneself with the community” (BT Brakhot 30b). The beit knesset is a place of meeting as well as a place for prayer. Minyan has been the traditional expression behind critical questions of community: Who is part of our community? Where and when does the community meet? What is the content of our meeting? As we have begun to delve into tefillah as community we have asked ourselves these question and more. Three of the central questions that have served as a compass for our thoughts and work on tefillah are:

1) Is there an expression of tefillah that can be developed within parts of a community that do not see themselves as...
halachically obligated or spiritually connected to prayer?

2) Must prayer be defined within the classic parameters of venue, text and community?

3) As our community strives for spiritual growth in prayer, is there a limit to the flexibility that we can afford to express while remaining connected to the continuum of our traditions?

Prayers Old and New

Keeping 700 students orderly and calm at an assembly in a cramped social hall can be a challenge. However, when the first notes of Hallel are belted out, the students lean forward to see which of their friends is the chazzan and are naturally swept up in the song and hand motions that they have passed on from month to month and year to year. One of the richest expressions of community tefillah we have developed over the last several years has been the Rosh Chodesh ceremony.

This monthly assembly has seen varied expressions of teacher and student input, yet its core has been in place since its inception: the Hallel prayer, piyyut and modern Israeli song. Heftziba Kelner, our music instructor, has taken upon herself the task of teaching the students the Psalms of Hallel, medieval as well as modern piyyut and modern Israeli song as part of our music curriculum. This educational project has produced moments of prayer that span from King David through traditional Iraqi or Ethiopian piyyut to Naomi Shemer and Ehud Manor. In this way we are able to include and connect to the cultural traditions that reflect our varied student body. Through this experience we have expanded our community through prayer. Each individual student gains a connection to his/her family’s cultural heritage while they also develop a new respect for the cultures of the communities of their classmates. New immigrants from Ethiopia are no longer seen as temporary immigrant students staying for a year or so bussed in from their absorption center, but as representatives of a culture that can enrich the makeup and prayer of our wider school community. In this experience we have learned that prayer can be experienced outside of the synagogue, can include non-canonical texts and can bring together elements from varied backgrounds to widen and strengthen our entire community.

As we have learned to expand the texts of our communal tefillah and to be more

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 52]
inclusive of a wider community, we have also learned to include parents, natural members of a school community that are frequently forgotten. While preparing to present our second graders with Siddurim, we invited their parents to participate in a workshop which centered around the question of what tefillah means to them. Is tefillah a presence in their lives, a memory from their childhood, or perhaps something they never participated in and are experiencing for the first time together with their children? By including the parents and their connections to tefillah in our wider conversation, we are further expanding the community of prayer while strengthening the core of our community—the students.

Two Shuls on One Island... and Beyond

We are all familiar with the joke of one Jew and two shuls, so perhaps 700 kids and two shuls would not be so bad...

As the bell rings at 8 o’clock the students of Kfar Adumim can be found together in the playground rebounding basketballs, kicking goals and skipping on the hopscotch court. With a little bit (or a lot) of cajoling the students make their way to their homerooms. However, they do not stay in the classroom for long. Some of the children join other kids in their grade for tefillah. Other kids meet up with students in a multi-age forum and find their way to groups of their choice for Siach Shacharit.

As a mixed, pluralistic school we have experimented with various options to create a meaningful experience parallel to tefillah. Under the leadership of Shirley Shoval we have developed a program called Siach Shacharit. The program was developed with the intention of mimicking certain elements of tefillah: a communal gathering which provides time for introspection and discussion. This program, which has taken off in the last five years, offers various multi-age groups from which the children choose at the beginning of the year and attend each morning. Teachers are encouraged to create a curriculum based on their hobbies and interests providing for rich and varied options. Furthermore, in certain groups a poem or song has been instituted as an opening or closing to each session, a “set prayer” for the group.

In these meetings the students start the day in a self-selected group, in a calm atmosphere, engaged in open conversation and meaningful experiences. Over the years students have chosen between groups that focus on working in the community garden, music, literature, crafts, current events, chasidic stories and other topics. The elements of a varied beginning to the day, choice, and multi-age groups have made Siach Shacharit a great success. In this experiment we have discovered new communities within our school and new voices (both among the staff and students!) within ourselves.

Due to the great success of this alternative, we have invested fresh energies into our traditional tefillah as well. In this realm we have found ourselves constantly experimenting (as so many others have) with various tools: song and stories, a personal siddur, prayer journals, Q&A about tefillah, and much more. Currently we are engaging teachers in workshops designed to allow them to discover prayer as individuals. We believe that if a teacher has asked herself meaningful, spiritual questions she will be better equipped to lead tefillah with her students. While some of these ideas have produced a richer tefillah, engaging children in a meaningful prayer on a daily basis continues to challenge the staff and students.

For our next steps we have focused our attention on Israeli society today and in particular at the communities surrounding the school. In these we see people who are equally comfortable and interested in traditional tefillah as they are in a fuller experience surrounding tefillah. They are creating new groups and communities which are expanding the boundaries of traditional tefillah to include varied spiritual explorations and expressions of community.

We believe that tefillah in school must reflect our wider community. We would like to provide this model for our students. We envision a spectrum of opportunities—from traditional tefillah to open siach—with many alternatives in-between that can include different expressions of the two sides: piyut, meditation, song, guided imagery, dialogue relating to communal, religious and national identity, and much more.

In this experiment we are questioning the nature of the plurality of voices in our community. In the past we indeed had two shuls—one for traditional prayer and one for siach. For many years, the two groups did not mingle during those experiences. We would now like to enrich our community—by forming not one shul, but several. By choosing plurality over uniformity, we can provide our students with the opportunity to give new spiritual expression within the broader school community. Certain children will lead the way in traditional tefillah, others will take charge in Siach and still others will combine these worlds to create together new voices and new groups within our larger community.

Through the examples described here we have shared our efforts to grapple with the questions presented earlier. Through Siach Shacharit we have attempted to develop a program that provides an alternative to tefillah while maintaining a framework that reflects elements of tefillah. In creating unique experiences such as selichot and Rosh Chodesh we have reconsidered questions of venue of prayer and text in addition to strengthening our community. Finally in our current experiment we are engaging teachers to lend their unique voice to tefillah. As an outgrowth of that we seek to explore the limits and guidelines of tefillah in our community.

We certainly do not imagine that we have reached the end of a process. We hope that we have developed certain approaches and experiences that enrich our community and can be of assistance and guidance to others. Over the next few years we will continue to create and wrestle with the challenge of tefillah.
Surely there is much to be learned from the evolving philosophy of general studies education. Children—and Jews of all ages—need both keva and kavvanah. No day school educator hopes to raise a Jew who puts on tefillin at minyan every morning but who mindlessly recites the prayers with no heart. Likewise, no day school hopes that their graduates will grow up to be unfamiliar with the basic prayer service found in any Jewish setting.

Self-Reflection

How do we accomplish excellence in secular education today? We show a full commitment to both facts and concepts, and we balance one with the other. Each is our goal, and we measure our success through targeted practice and assessment. We attend professional development for each of those skills, and stretch our academic program year after year.

When was the last time we attended a professional workshop on excellence in tefillot? When was the last time we stated our goals for skill development and content knowledge of prayers? Have we conducted an in-depth study of different prayer options, or did we just create a list? How many of us closely supervise our tefillot programs? Are we inclined to delegate this sacred responsibility to a “prayer specialist,” or outsource it to community clergy?

Vision of the Future

It is our duty to be both custodians of keva and generators of kavvanah.

A Mirowitz parent who is a Conservative rabbi recently told me that his synagogue clergy meets weekly to talk about “what tunes will NOT change in services that week.” The purpose of this practice is to guard the keva. This kind of vigilance is also our duty in day schools. We need to do more than just invite in community clergy to lead our children in prayer. We need to do more than just try to “hire the right person” and appoint them to take care of that part of the day. Indeed, our students must achieve a comfort level with the structure, the tunes and the flow of traditional Jewish prayer.

But with equal diligence, we must also be guardians of kavvanah. Day school students (and educators!) are incredibly fortunate. We get to start each of our school days with depth and meaning. We have the opportunity to converse with the Divine and allow the prayers to teach us how we should behave throughout our day, how we should interact with our community and how we can strengthen our relationship with God. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us that the very act of prayer can bring about holiness.

As educators, it is our duty to bring together the worlds of keva and kavvanah—and to safeguard the balance between the two.

Our students should be able not only to recite the prayers, but to articulate that like Balaam who first uttered the words nishbah tovu, we have the power to turn our curses into blessings. Like Miriam and the children of Israel who proclaimed mi khamsokha, we should sing songs of joy for our freedom. And, as we are reminded in avot ve-imahot, we should strive to have a unique relationship with God. The fixed prayers children say in the morning should lead them to behave with kindness, ethics and integrity throughout their day.

We are on a journey at Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School to create a practical definition of pluralism in our tefillot. We hope to infuse children with both skills and omek—keva and kavvanah—and to continually nurture our students’ growth and deepen their love of Judaism. Our journey is far from complete, and we are proceeding with our eye on the future of the Jewish community, a commitment to self-reflection, and a desire to achieve excellence.
Iyyun Tefillah Through the Eyes of Inquiry

by Beth Fine and Suzanne Messinger

Schools often struggle with the study of tefillah—finding time for it and strong pedagogical methods. Here’s a solution employed by one school.

When Judaic studies teachers at our school, the Jewish Day School of Metropolitan Seattle, carve out precious time to reflect on our practice and review the spiral of our curriculum, we charge into conversations about Torah and Hebrew, we reflect on the ways we encourage our students to grow as friends and responsible people, but we often shy away from discussing tefillah. The topic feels abstract yet fraught with significance, the skills require rote competence combined with alert intellects and hearts, the pedagogic goals and approaches differ by teacher background. A majority of our students have no contact with prayer outside of school until they approach their bnei mitzvah years, while those who do attend services can be found in synagogues throughout the denominational spectrum.

How do we structure the learning so that students find prayer relevant and meaningful, a source of joy and growth? How do we encourage our students to develop a sense of attachment to prayer that enriches their lives and thus enriches and sustains the Jewish community? No wonder we are unsure how to approach teaching tefillah! Yet our recent experiences in teaching through inquiry have borne rich fruit in this and other subject areas.

Our day school has embarked on an exciting journey over the past several years, as we embrace inquiry as a pedagogical approach to curriculum development throughout the school. A wealth of resources are available for general studies; we must use our imaginations to extend the inquiry paradigm and methodology into Judaic studies and in particular into teaching iyyun tefillah, a focus on deep understanding as well as prayer skills. In this article we give an overview of our approach to inquiry, share the outline of two units which use inquiry to examine prayer and open a conversation with other schools that may be on a similar path.

At JDS we use the inquiry cycle (as defined by Kath Murdoch in Classroom Connections) as the curriculum framework to design and implement teaching units. The inquiry cycle is based on the belief that inquiry is a process of learning that guides learners in constructing meaning about themselves and the world. This structured learning path focuses on engaging the learner actively in the process, developing thinking, interpersonal and research skills and creating a sense of responsibility in the learner for their progress and work.

Students engage actively with material and with each other, building meaning through doing rather than listening. They work in twos and in small groups, practicing listening to each other and valuing each other’s ideas while expressing their own thoughts with confidence. Students are taught to ask questions and think critically about ideas. They notice and pursue areas that most interest them, developing the skills to present their self-directed learning to others. Students come to see their work as significant, feel a responsibility to share their learning and take action in the world.

How do we encourage our students to develop a sense of attachment to prayer that enriches their lives and thus enriches and sustains the Jewish community?

We have developed a couple of inquiry units in third grade on two pieces of tefillah: Birkat HaMazon, the prayer after eating, and Havdallah, the set of prayers that end Shabbat. We have also adapted the specific case study—the unit on building blessings could easily be adapted for studying the Amidah, for example. Next, we present the essential questions which structure the content. Each question guides our learning through
texts and other resources, active engagements, burning questions and reflections on learning. Each inspires activities that encourage students to think, experience, practice, challenge and integrate the embedded skills and concepts.

The inquiry cycle is made up of 7 stages: tuning in, finding out, sorting out, drawing conclusions, going further, taking action and reflecting. This learning cycle lends itself to meaningful study of prayer.

The first essential question of each unit sets the stage for tuning in. It is purposefully designed to give the students the opportunity to make connections between themselves and the enduring understanding. In these two units, these questions initiate learners to engage in prayer: how does this text connect to me, how is it relevant or significant for me? The goal of tuning in is that on the very first day of the unit, each student can begin to feel how the topic is relevant and meaningful to him or her. Students make connections and their connections get at the why rather than the what of a unit.

The next essential questions are designed to guide both the teacher and students through new, shared learning experiences. Finding out is an invitation for students to construct new knowledge and understanding of the topic. Teachers give students the opportunity to explore several resources and participate in a variety of learning engagements. These include guest speakers, field trips, hands-on explorations, books, magazine articles, movies and Internet resources. Teachers choose engagements that actively involve students by allowing them time to explore and observe, make choices and engage in conversation.

For example, in the Building Blessings unit, the teacher scattered different blessings around the room. Students walked from blessing to blessing reading them, using a T-chart with the categories “I think / I wonder.” This encouraged students to notice what they already knew about blessings and what their questions were at that point in the learning. These questions were then used to guide peer-to-peer and class discussions.

Each question inspires activities that encourage students to think, experience, practice, challenge and integrate the embedded skills and concepts.

The cycle then moves into finding out and sorting out, when the learner develops new understanding and skills in relation to the topic—in this case, learning how to chant and understand the prayer. During the going further stage, students discuss and research their and their classmates’ questions. Using the inquiry cycle both structures and deepens the teaching. Each activity builds on the last, allowing students to organize their own thoughts and the newly acquired knowledge in a useful manner, and then asks students to use that knowledge. This is very different from teaching students a prayer in a rote manner and then asking them to sing it back as proof of learning. Here we grapple with big ideas, with philosophical dilemmas, with the reasons for prayer, with our own doubts and hopes.

Throughout the inquiry cycle, teachers provide opportunities for their students to ask and record their burning questions. When an engagement or discussion sparks a question that warrants further discussion or research, students affix it to the

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Two Lessons on Tefillah Using the Inquiry Model

First Unit: Building Blessings

Essential Understanding

Blessings, including Birkat HaMazon, the blessing after eating, are meant to fill our Jewish lives with awareness and thankfulness. This can happen when we are aware of the meaning, the structure and the intention that builds a blessing.

Essential Questions

• When do I experience thankfulness and appreciation? How do I show that?
• What is a blessing? What are the parts of a blessing?
• How do blessings express thankfulness and appreciation?
• How do we chant and understand Birkat HaMazon?
• How does Jewish tradition offer guidelines for eating?
• What is our responsibility to make the phrase “give food to all” come true?

Second Unit: Walking the Lines of Time

Essential Understanding

We make time holy by setting special moments apart and recognizing the transition from regular to holy and back again.

Essential Questions

• Why do we need separations and lines in time?
• What does “kadosh” or “holy” mean? What makes time holy?
• How do Shabbat and Havdallah interrelate?
• How do we observe Havdallah?
• How can we share our learning?
This year has seen the creation of several peer networks, or reshetot (reshetot in Hebrew), enabling leaders at RAVSAK schools to share their initiative, wisdom and experience, thus leveraging the power of our network for the benefit of all our schools. These networks have flourished at a distance, primarily through listservs buzzing with conversations and conference calls rich in content.

The North American Jewish Day School Conference provided a wonderful backdrop for Reshet RAVSAK participants to get to know each other in person. RAVSAK hosted receptions for Reshet HoS and JD, as well as a separate get-together for board members in the newly formed Reshet Board. Additionally, Reshet ECE hosted a conversation over breakfast. Each of these gatherings presented an opportunity for people to make personal connections with peers, fostering greater comfort and familiarity among schools that will enhance the fieldwide conversations taking place in various media.

Several new varieties of Reshet RAVSAK are in development, including Reshet SuLaM for alumni of this premiere program. We invite and encourage you to leap into the network(s) most appropriate to your work. If you have an idea for a reshet you’d like to help create, email Reshet@ravsak.org to share your suggestion. Learn, teach, and take part in the excitement of Reshet RAVSAK!
burning questions board. These questions then become the starting point for rich classroom discussions and independent research in the going further stage of the inquiry cycle.

In the Walking the Lines of Time unit, students came up with some of the following questions: Why are the five senses used in the Havdallah blessings? How does fire remind us of God? What would help me have a good week? What is a Messiah? Who was Elijah? How come there is so much wine in Jewish tradition? How is wine made?

One of the most exciting parts of the inquiry cycle occurs when students have completed their shared learning experiences. The taking action phase asks learners to do something with the learning, whether acting in the world, sharing the learning with others or pursuing areas of interest and questions which arose. The teacher asks, What next? Now that you are experts in this topic, what will you do with your learning? How will you show what you know, share it with your community or take action in response?

The final question in the Building Blessings Unit asks, What is our responsibility to make the phrase “give food to all” come true? Last year the third grade class decided to raise money for a local charity that fights hunger by having a craft and bake sale. The class determined tasks that needed to be accomplished and broke into groups. One group researched local charities and made a recommendation to the class. Another gathered recipes and ingredients, so we could bake goodies in the school kitchen.

A third collected materials and created crafts. One group worked on advertising, writing a blog and creating posters. Other students priced all the crafts and treats, brought in change and kept track of the profits. Our class raised $700 for an organization called Hopelink. This year’s class may choose a different way to take action and partner with God in fighting hunger.

We hope that this discussion has sparked your thinking about how teaching through inquiry could enrich your teaching of iyyun tefillah. One of the most powerful elements of our school’s transformation over the last several years has been the power of collaboration. We come together in a room to dream about enduring understandings, the big ideas we want our students to encounter, as well as the case studies that would illustrate that big question. We work through creating essential questions, the road map of the learning process.

We are confident that our practice would be enriched by ideas from other schools, and similarly hope to have something we could contribute to your school’s growth. We think that putting our heads together and collaborating with other like-minded faculties on developing inquiry units in iyyun tefillah would be an exciting and potentially rewarding endeavor. Join us?

Alexander Muss High School in Israel (AMHSI) works closely with Jewish day schools and community organizations to customize an Israel experience that meets the school’s and organization’s educational philosophy and goals. AMHSI offers campus-based programs, travel programs, creative itineraries and committed educators who bring Israel’s history to life. Through AMHSI, teens discover, explore and embrace their connection to Judaism as well as the people and culture of Israel.

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Studies show that giving students ownership over tefillah is one of the most effective ways for them to find meaning and develop engagement. Rosner describes an initiative for students to learn leadership skills through tefillah.

The last few years in education have brought much talk about “21st century skills” and our need to adjust to these changes. Educators are advised to include these skills in the curriculum. Critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and communication, curiosity and imagination, agility and adaptability are only some of the skills our students are expected to acquire, and we are expected to impart.

Students do not need merely knowledge but also “literacy,” the ability to apply their learning to meet real-world challenges. Whether scheduled daily, weekly or monthly, tefillah offers schools constant opportunities to develop 21st century skills within a Jewish context. However, in order to inspire our youth to engage in tefillah and to change their perspective about this valuable practice, we must empower them to take ownership over it and to make it relevant and real.

One way we can achieve this change is by addressing tefillah as a leadership opportunity. To that end, the New Community Jewish High School in LA established the Tefillah Kehillah Institute five years ago. From year to year, students who are motivated to make a difference are chosen to learn about Jewish texts and tefillah, acquire and practice leadership skills, and develop and utilize a variety of modalities to create experiential and experimental tefillot for their community.

Through TKI, tefillah has become the source of leading and learning. From the perspective of the students, they are learning for the purpose of leading. From the educator’s perspective, they are leading for the purpose of learning. The community benefits from the meaningful student-led tefillot which expand upon the more traditional and faculty-led tefillot in the school.

The tefillah service that these student leaders provide enriches their learning experience and strengthens the community as a whole. By affording them the opportunity and responsibility to lead Kabbalat Shabbat in the nearby Jewish Home for the Aging or to inspire younger students at another day school to engage in Jewish spirituality, we enable the students not only to acquire the important skill of practical application of their studies but to become actively contributing community members.

In order to truly involve students in this process and allow them to grow as leaders, we give them guided freedom and allow them to make mistakes. This is a core principle of the TKI, which is based on a constructivist and multi-modal approach. Instead of having the students rely on our (sometimes unsuccessful) solutions to tefillah and accept them as truth, we expose them to data and primary sources and let them loose to create their own paradigms of Jewish prayer.

The process begins by presenting the framework of a given tefillah session including the date, length and the community members who will partake in the experience. Next, the students create, perform and reflect on their tefillah session through a cycle of (brain)storming, forming, norming, performing and growing through self-reflection. In each stage, the students develop and practice core 21st century leadership skills which are at the heart of the program.

Storming

God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” “Free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.” (Exodus 3:4-10)

Our texts teach us that every leadership role begins with a call to lead and the recognition of that calling by the leader himself/herself. In the storming stage,
the students start to explore their audience in order to find the balance between the needs and wants of this community. The class discusses the theme they would like to focus on and the message they might want to convey. Students develop their communication skills; they learn how to listen actively, to build upon the ideas of their peers and to articulate their own thoughts.

**Forming**

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt? What shall I say to them?” “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” (Exodus 3:11-14)

Leaders must become aware of their own merits but also recognize what they still need to learn. This is the time to learn for the purpose of leading. In the forming stage, the students develop a variety of tefillah components to allow them to convey their message and create a spiritual experience for the community. In order to do so, the students recognize that they must first deepen their knowledge and improve their leadership skills. The task invites exploration of Jewish texts relevant to the theme and message, to be introduced by the teacher and explored by the entire class.

Then the students often divide into smaller groups. Each group addresses a different aspect of the themes that the texts generate and creates a component relevant to the needs and wants of the community. This process provokes the students’ curiosity and motivates them to claim ownership over their own learning process. Their awareness extends outward from themselves to the others they wish to lead.

**Norming**

“I have never been a man of words… Make someone else Your agent!” “There is your brother Aaron… he shall speak for you to the people.” (Exodus 4:1-16)

A true leader does not need to know everything. She surrounds herself with resourceful and skillful advisors who help her make the right decisions. It is the process of leading others while learning from those you lead. Now that the students have a good idea about each component that they would like to utilize, they reach out beyond the TKI group to seek additional students and professionals with whom to collaborate.

Involving others in creating a tefillah not only guarantees that the session will be relevant to the majority of the community, but also allows the student leaders to introduce tefillah through a variety of modalities. Using meditation or yoga techniques to create a state of mindfulness, art and visuals to broaden or change people’s perspectives, and using music to encourage participation are some examples of modes to enrich and enhance the tefillah experience. Given that the student leaders are not always masters of such techniques, guest speakers, artists, musicians, faculty members or even proficient students can lead workshops for the TKI group and partake in the leading of the session for the community.

By the end of this stage, the groups assemble all their different ideas and components into one cohesive session outline. The students must be flexible as they adapt all the pieces into one coherent whole.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 67]
Supporting Minyan Leaders

by Reuven Margrett

At many schools, leading minyan is a task for which teachers are least prepared; yet few schools provide the time and support structures for teachers to reflect, learn and grow in this capacity. Margrett discusses his school’s approach.

In the world of tefillah, we are always thinking about goals of the minyanim, student motivation, how to assess skill development, and perhaps the occasional discipline issue. Yet are we thinking about appropriate support we can give minyan leaders?

My role as a minyan coordinator is certainly a logistical one. I figure out which teachers are leading a minyan, how students can sign up for their minyan choice, what is the focus of the non-davening minyanim, which students are going where, which rooms, etc.

Aside from logistics, I needed to ask myself, in what other ways can I help support the minyan leaders and the unique challenges they face? They meet students four days a week for 30-40 minutes attempting to engage students who are generally disengaged with formal Jewish prayer or Jewish spirituality. Most struggle with any conception of God, let alone a God who hears and interacts with humans. This is coupled with little student accountability for what happens during minyan, other than behavior, as no grades are given.

With this in mind, I wondered how my role as a minyan coordinator can impact, direct and help minyan leaders. With the encouragement and support of the Pardes Educators Program, I decided to do some action research focusing on the support minyan leaders need and want and the impact that support can have on their ability to lead.

Action research is a reflective process in which a person seeks to solve a problem or make a change, and conducts research while actively participating in that change. While there are some limitations to this small-scale research, I believe the lessons learned are useful, applicable and needed among all day schools.

My research focused on how I could use my role as coordinator to help minyan leaders:

a) be better prepared.
b) increase their repertoire of teaching experiences.
c) be more confident.

After meetings with teachers I would give them questionnaires or interview them to see how the changes were affecting them.

The results surprised me. With leaders receiving a little bit of structure and guidance, all three of the above goals were met. As teachers we all know the difference that appropriate support can foster among colleagues, regardless of whether you are the giver or receiver of such support. It is incumbent on all administrators to review the specific support they are offering minyan leaders and to seek ways to develop a robust support system. If minyan leaders are appropriately supported then their most difficult task becomes that much easier.

Support

Teachers want collaboration and idea sharing, particularly practical ideas of appropriate and relevant activities to do in the classroom. Minyan leaders were concerned about having good ideas and activities to engage students and to increase student motivation. (We had general minyan meetings for all minyan leaders, but the time was used to discuss larger minyan issues and not for idea sharing.)

Among the greatest assets we have in our school are the people who lead minyan. Some have had years of experience and know what works. Leading minyan feels like culinary art: you need to know the ingredients you have and how to work with them. Success means a flavorful result which most enjoy, whereas the opposite is unpalatable for all, including the chef. Novice minyan leaders can learn a great amount from the veterans, and even the most experienced can develop their repertoire.

Minyan meetings

What emerged from the above was the establishment of a fixed 9th grade minyan meeting that met every two or three weeks and lasted one hour. The aim of the meeting was to go through the piece of curricula we were focusing on. We would discuss:

a) The prayers the minyanim were working on, and major themes and ideas that came from it.
b) Suggestions about how to turn those ideas into classroom activities.

In an attempt to formalize the discussion I created a Google doc entitled “The Big Book of Tefillah Ideas.” We would look at a particular brakhah with siddurim in front of us, brainstorm ideas that come from the brakhah, and then come up with minyan activities that teach those ideas to the students. While the minyan leaders discussed their ideas, I typed them up onto a projected whiteboard.

I was surprised how a change of focus from the normal meeting agenda (announcements, issues, new ideas, planning, etc.) to more practical outcomes changed the effects of such meetings. Rather than minyan leaders merely knowing more logistics, or having thought about minyan ideas that may or may not happen, they were coming away with practical, relevant materials, ideas and activities that they could use in their minyan. Due to this, no one thought these meetings were a waste of time, and even further some began to feel that this meetings were essential to help them be competent minyan leaders.

Collaboration

The collaboration during the meetings allowed for new ways of looking at how to teach tefillah. Oftentimes ideas derived not from one person but from the combined energies in the room. After one meeting where we brainstormed the 13th blessing of Amidah (concerning tzaddikim, the righteous) and came up with the idea of doing a “secret tzaddik” activity (like secret Santa, or gamad-im), one minyan did the activity in their classroom. In the following meeting one teacher gave the following feedback: “Secret tzaddik didn’t work the first time—not focused enough instructions. Worked second time.” The meetings gave minyan leaders the support they needed in order to try, and fail.

Previously the minyan leaders had displayed a certain tunnel vision. They were concerned only about their own minyan, and they didn’t have time to discuss with other minyan leaders unless there was a big issue. The focused meetings created the time for positive open discussions allowing genuine creativity that was authentic, rather than forced. Minyan leaders were also encouraged by the support they found in their colleagues and the realization that the other minyanim were not perfect. This meant that risk-taking was

Leading minyan feels like culinary art: you need to know the ingredients you have and how to work with them. Success means a flavorful result which most enjoy.
**Answering Parents’ Prayers**

*by JUDD Kruger Levingston*

While fraught with pitfalls, engaging parents in formulating school policy can be especially valuable and rewarding in the area of tefillah, which is often bound up with issues of family and community identity.

Schools often struggle over the extent to which parents and the extended community should be involved with the formulation of policy. When our school began to explore the possibility of having tefillah during the school day, we knew that we would need parent involvement and support. (Previously, there were only voluntary services held in the morning before the start of school.) Discussions began shortly after our parents participated in a national survey developed and administered by Measuring Success and supported by PEJE. When the results were tabulated, we learned that our parents rated our writing program highly. To our disappointment, we also learned that we placed in the bottom third of our peer group in the degree to which parents would recommend our school on the basis of the Jewish development of their children.

When we thought about the issue, we also realized that Jewish development, however we might understand it, had not necessarily been part of the 65 year-old mission of our school. Over the years, the school’s Statement of Mission has focused on nurturing academic excellence, on promoting young leadership and on affirming each student’s moral development. Spiritual development was not included.

Barrack Academy was founded by secular Zionists and Hebraists in the 1940s. Regularly scheduled religious services were not held during the school day. Students dressed up for Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies on Fridays, and the daily schedule changed for special Rosh Chodesh and holiday programming, but unlike other Jewish day schools, the schedule did not include time for daily services.

As director of Jewish studies, I was asked to lead a task force to probe the implications of the survey data and to see if we could improve our program sufficiently to meet the hopes and expectations of our parents. It would make good business sense, too, because we knew that the same PEJE survey would be administered again in just another couple of years.

The task force quickly learned that nobody agreed on the definition of “Jewish development.” Some saw it as synonymous with religious development; others saw it as related to Jewish learning and intellectual development. Others related it to identity development. Our discussions led us to ask if our ideal Barrack graduate also was a successfully developed Jewish individual.

The task force came to realize that parents probably did not understand the term any better than we did, and after several conversations in which we attempted to clarify our understanding of Jewish development, we settled on the following areas:

- Exploring central ideas and major thinkers in Jewish philosophy
- Participating in regular prayer as part of the school day
- Developing familiarity and competency with synagogue skills
- Developing personal faith and a personal Jewish theology
- Developing skills for studying biblical and rabbinic texts
- Achieving expertise in studying biblical and rabbinic texts
- Feeling good about being Jewish
- Drawing on Jewish sources to make mature moral and social choices
- Identifying with modern Israel

Having settled on an understanding of Jewish development, the task force decided to open the door once again to parent opinion in a second survey (recent alumni and juniors and seniors were also surveyed).

This survey asked respondents just two questions: to rank their priorities among these areas, and to rate the school’s success in achieving them.

We were pleased to receive responses from more than 60% of our parents. While “Feeling good about being Jewish,” “Identifying with modern Israel,” and “Knowledge of Jewish history” all received high rankings, about a third of our parents indicated that regular religious services as part of the school day were important to them. We also learned that they care about synagogue skills and home ritual practices. When we combined the numbers of parents placing a
priority on these three goals, we felt confident that a significant number of our parents would be supportive of an effort to bring tefillot into our school day.

Many of our students were asking for daily tefillot as well. A large number of our students come to us as ninth graders from other Jewish day schools, and many have expressed regret at missing the special connection that they felt from participating in Jewish rituals and prayers in their former schools.

With a new head of school and a supportive board, our school leadership felt that it had sufficient mandate to move forward with plans to have Shacharit services on Monday and Thursday mornings. Having Shacharit services as part of the school day became part of a shift in school culture that was supported by the board, many of the parents, the administration, the teachers, and, ultimately, by the majority of students as well.

Because we knew that a number of parents might oppose this shift, I led two open discussions about tefillot for parents and several with students as well. Some of the parents were vociferously opposed to Shacharit services, citing the school’s mission as they understood it, asking why services were more valuable than biology, English or Jewish studies classes that could shape a student’s intellect and moral development. One parent felt that it should not be the business of the school to require anybody to pray, that prayer should be part of a student’s home life, not a part of school life. Many students felt the same, telling me that they were dead set against “mandatory prayer.”

I answered the students and parents by telling them that I, too, was against “mandatory prayer.” I agreed wholeheartedly that students shouldn’t be forced to pray. As a Jewish educator, I told them, I could not use my position in the school to require that anybody pray. At the same time, I explained, the school leadership felt that it was not unreasonable to ask that students at a Jewish day school become familiar with formal Jewish prayer as a part of their education.

To address this concern, we formulated a scheme that led to the acceptance of tefillah among some of the more resistant parents. Students were asked to sign up for one trimester in a siddur-based Shacharit group and for two trimesters of any other group that would please them. No more than ten or fifteen students (less than 5%) of our students asked to be released from the siddur-based group, so we have strong attendance both in our regular minyanim (Orthodox/mechitzah, middle school egalitarian, upper school egalitarian, and explanatory) and in our other reflection groups.

Students in the different reflection groups practice yoga or guided imagery, make art, listen to music from different traditions, write in their journals, read dramatic scripts that raise theological, philosophical and moral issues, and listen to literature that raises moral issues. These groups have emerged from teacher initiative. Teachers are encouraged to offer a Shacharit group that relates to their interests.

As a Jewish educator, I could not use my position in the school to require that anybody pray. At the same time, it was not unreasonable to ask that students at a Jewish day school become familiar with formal Jewish prayer.

We still face the ongoing challenge of maintaining our Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday minyanim that meet before the school day. With parent support, we have tried to build attendance with an online signup website and word of mouth. We also welcome parents on Mondays or Thursdays immediately before or after the bar or bat mitzvah. Parents enjoy taking us up on this invitation because they are eager to mark the occasion and to bridge their home and school communities by celebrating the bar or bat mitzvah with the school community.

What have we learned from involving our parents in tefillot?

When framing the scope and goals of a tefillah program, it was very helpful to have a joint parent-staff task force deployed to explore the issues, to consider areas of resistance, and to develop strategies. It was essential that the task force had gathered parent insights through the survey so that we can continue to refer to that data as questions come up about the role of Shacharit in the school.

Once a minyan or Shacharit program is launched, many parents may be willing to help make a minyan. Some parents may even look to their children’s school for a minyan if they are saying Kaddish and don’t have time to get to a shul.

Parents are willing to support the school’s efforts to educate students about tefillot and to have tefillot constitute an important element in the school’s educational program when they are assured that their sons and daughters are not going to be “forced to pray.”

When they are allowed to choose some of the terms of their engagement, students are willing to accept and buy into a program with tefillot when it is cast as reflection time, as a gift, as time for enrichment, and, yes, also as an opportunity to connect with God and with the community.

Schools looking to begin or strengthen a program of tefillot can benefit from involving parents in multiple ways as we did through a survey, through focus groups, and through a task force that was charged with interpreting the survey results, with making programmatic suggestions and with supporting the school’s efforts to create a new, meaningful, responsive and sustainable Shacharit program.

The task force completed its work once it made its recommendations, but its impact was far-reaching for the goodwill it generated among parents and for the program that it allowed to begin.
Among the many factors that impinge upon tefillah, the physical environment is one that sometimes goes unnoticed. Whether or not a school has a designed space for davening, thought should be given to the literal, as well as metaphorical, place of prayer in a school.

Every year colleagues in our school, and others around the country, debate what to do about the shameful lack of decorum displayed by many twelve and thirteen year-old students at bar and bat mitzvah celebrations. “Don’t they know how to behave in shul? Don’t they know what being in a sanctuary means....?”

And yet, an obvious answer everyone tries to avoid is simply no, they do not. They find synagogue less solemn, less beautiful and less understandable than the previous generation. The quiet pews, the sacred decor and accoutrements of a place of prayer have less of a visceral impact, mainly because there is less exposure to them, and our students, therefore in turn, understand less of what is expected in such a place. Davening at our school takes place in a classroom, and many of our students rarely attend synagogue services.

School must therefore shoulder an ever-growing burden of tefillah education. Until recently at our high school, students had mandatory prayer three times weekly and had to choose between a traditional mechitzah minyan and a contemporary minyan that included a traditional egalitarian service. Neither minyan met with overall success or excitement. The vast majority of students attended the contemporary service with just a handful of students choosing the traditional mechitzah option.

The contemporary service was held in a multipurpose room that became a classroom immediately following prayers, and the traditional service met in either the science lab or the art room. When science or art classes had major projects with large set-ups, the minyan was displaced to a random classroom or the school lobby. If sufficient chairs were unavailable, students sat on tables instead.

While prayer is a personal experience, a private endeavor of the heart, it has been a sociological value of our peoplehood for a very long time. Tefillah is a word most often used when describing the actions of a community—a tzibur, a kehillah, a kahal. A congregation gathers together to a specific sanctified location with a common mind and purpose.

Within the very fabric of institutionalized Jewish prayer is the goal to recreate the Holy Temple experience. The beit knesset, a house of gathering, was meant to recreate a mikdash me’at, the Holy Temple in miniature. When we pay attention to the length of prayer, the amount of prayer, the variety of types of prayer, but we ignore where we pray, can we really hope to educate our students about a prayer experience that is meant to evoke the feelings of entering the Holy Temple?

When our school refocused on our goals—students who were fluent and comfortable enough with prayer that occasional inspiration through prayer would occur; students who could choose to pray and know how to pray—the importance of atmosphere, of sacred space became dramatically evident. The ancient rabbis created the experience of prayer in a beit knesset for the very purpose of our stated goals. Tefillah in synagogue creates fluency within a common language of ritual and practice through which Jews can engage spirituality as a regular part of their every day. And despite the regularity, the overall experience of a beit knesset should feel inspirational.

To stay more aligned with our goals we instituted two crucial changes. Our high school moved to a schedule of daily prayer each and every day of the school week. Teaching the habits of prayer would truly be a daily habit, and this shift kicked up much less of a stir than we expected. It actually felt like a natural transition.
The second change had a greater impact: we designated a room for prayer. With only one room newly made available, it was designed to address the more pressing needs of one minyan. No longer did the participants of the traditional mechitzah service travel from location to location throughout the week, nor do they spend the first few minutes of every day rearranging the chairs and desks, then reassembling a classroom at the end of prayers.

Students walk into a room set up as a synagogue, a bright, orderly space that conveys an impression of kedushah. Each student takes a siddur, many begin to wrap their tefillin, and prayers begin. There is, of course, some typical quieting down that needs to take place, but the struggle that once existed to remind students of the purpose of the place has evaporated. Students no longer walk into tefillah geared up to fight, and teachers don’t preemptively prepare for battle.

The students instinctively know when they enter that this place is different, and so must be their behavior. The mechitzah minyan that once struggled to reach a quorum now struggles to find seats when eighth graders opt to join in. Just over half our student body participate in this minyan, and it is at this minyan that they are learning the skillset of tefillah. They learn not just the skills needed to turn to the correct page and sing the words of our people, but also how to respect the sanctity of space and how silence can be solemn and comfortable. They learn how to connect to each other without cellphones and without words. They are learning what the physical atmosphere of prayer feels like because we have deliberately chosen to teach just that.

Our contemporary minyan service is still well attended, still meets in a multipurpose room, and noticeably, still suffers from significant decorum challenges each and every day. Attempts to elicit more respect for the endeavor of prayer often falls on deaf ears. The students enter a room in disorder, quickly abandoned after a class, and they reluctantly file into the room that resembles nothing like a sacred space. It would be difficult to say that all the students’ challenges in prayer would cease through the room’s extreme makeover. However, space, along with the conscious and subconscious reactions it evokes, plays an extremely important and often overlooked role in the Jewish prayer experience.

As tefillah leaders and educators, we must remember that our lessons must transmit more than words and songs; we must be cognizant of the holistic quality of Jewish prayer. What does synagogue sound like, smell like, feel like and look like? Our students must be made to ask themselves, “How comfortable am I in a space that truly feels like a space for prayer? How does it make me feel, and what do I want to do about that?”

All of this is prayer. All of this is part of the Holy Temple experience, and it must all be part of our final product. We must plan for it, and perhaps only then will our students display a sense of awe and decorum in our synagogues.

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Supporting Minyan Leaders

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courage. As a result, creativity and risk-taking increased in the minyanim.

Self-reflection and evaluation

A meta-aim of the meetings was to help teachers be more reflective on the success of what they were doing.

Minyan leaders made two points concerning the activities they did in class. The first is that experiential activities led to increased student engagement. The second is that they were not convinced that more engaged students result in a better learning of prayer texts. Whilst these evaluations are particular to our school, this process of self-evaluation is relevant to all schools.

By taking the time to share, review and plan, minyan leaders became more reflective of what it was they were trying to achieve. Critical to any meaningful development of minyan leaders is for them to ask themselves if they are being effective. Minyan leaders were really engaged, and invested, in the overall aims of what minyan at our school was trying to achieve. Furthermore, their input was essential for me as minyan coordinator to know what was working, or not, and to thoughtfully plan for the future.

Conclusion

After seeing the effects on minyan leaders, and the focus and support they had gained, I was surprised that I had not done this sooner. As with everything else, there were time constraints, both of myself and with the minyan leaders. Yet we made the time, once every two or three weeks for a shared, focused, and practical minyan meeting. Key to the success was that only those engaged in similar minyanim were invited. General minyan issues were left for general minyan meetings.

This one rather simple idea made a big impact on those minyan leaders; one commented that “it revolutionized my minyan experience.” How many other opportunities are we missing that could help our minyan leaders to grow, develop and feel supported? How many in the administration are concerned about curriculum, and minyan goals, yet fail to focus on the most precious asset we have: the minyan leader?
The passionate leader attracts others. His rhetorical skills and gravitas commands attention and respect. The performance stage is the peak of the leadership experience. It is the process of leading others while learning from one’s own leadership. In order for the students to successfully facilitate their tefillah session, they must learn how to speak in front of an audience with voice and presence; to become aware and take advantage of their body, voice and pace; to lead a discussion while listening carefully to the responses; to manage time and make decisions, and to adjust their plans in real time. This is an ongoing process that requires repeated trials and constant support as these young leaders gain confidence and develop their voice. In our experience, the student body and the community respond much better when led by these student leaders, even when their expertise does not match those of veteran educators.

Reflection and Growing

“Why did You send me?” “You shall know that I, YHVH, am your God.” (Exodus 5:22-6:7)

The leadership experience is not complete without the personal and professional growth achieved by individual and group reflection. Students realize how much their leading experience benefited their learning. They reflect upon their contributions to the creation and execution of the tefillah session; they provide positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. Students discuss their session’s impact on the community and discuss ways that the experience was valuable. The process ends with students sharing and discussing their insights within the classroom setting with the goal of supporting the growth of the group of leaders as a whole.

Currently, the Tefillah Kehillah Institute includes over 30 trained student leaders in grades 10-12, a figure which constitutes approximately 10 percent of our entire student body. Following Jethro’s advice to Moses, we have sought out from among all the people “capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain” (Exodus 18:21) and set these over New Community Jewish High School as “chiefs of tens” to help our next generation enter the 21st century though the realm of tefillah and leadership. It is my hope that you will consider and appropriate this advice as well and “make it easier for yourself by letting them [your students] share the burden with you” (Exodus 18:22).
RAVSAK Art Contest

The RAVSAK Art Contest requires a challenging regimen of Jewish study and artistic interpretation. Participants delve into Jewish sources and only then create works of art that grow out of their study. This year’s theme was “Blessing the Bad,” a chapter out of the curriculum Blessings and Gratitude produced by our partners, the Global Day of Jewish Learning. Below are the winners, chosen by art teachers at our schools, accompanied by judges’ notes explaining their selections. For a gallery of some of the top entries, along with their artist’s statements, go to www.ravsak.org/programs/art-contest. Congratulations to all of the artists for their fine work.

MIDDLE SCHOOL - FIRST PLACE

Rachel Weiss
• Hillel Academy of Tampa

This three dimensional sculpture carries a strong message. The judges were impressed by the clarity of thought and how it was communicated. This is a sculpture that illustrates the balance between good and evil by showing a good face and a bad face precariously balanced on a thin wire. Both faces form part of a whole. The use of color lends to the mood. The happier more serene face has bold bright colors while the evil side was done in grays and blacks. The ethereal wisps of tissue paper at the top add movement as they reach up towards a higher power; reminding us that God loves us, and that we are all a balance between good and bad.
Ethan Plotsker’s work is a touching tribute to his father. The painting clearly depicts a son who is quietly cherishing the memory of his father while “holding” him in his heart. Technically the painting is well executed, it clearly conveys the strong emotions expressed in the artist statement of why we bless the bad.
MIDDLE SCHOOL - SECOND PLACE

Tori Lamport
• Hillel Academy of Tampa

This beautiful painting on silk carries a strong message. It brings us back to the Garden of Eden to illustrate that in the beginning evil was already present. The snake that is wrapped around the tree carries words that represent evil. This is contrasted with the beauty of the garden, its vibrant color palette and lovely floral shapes. The artist clearly communicates that we do not live in a perfect world where no evil exists.

HIGH SCHOOL - SECOND PLACE

Emily Lipson
• Donna Klein Jewish Academy,
Boca Raton

Emily Lipson’s art is technically excellent. It is a beautiful painting of her grandfather; however, we were also impressed by the artist’s statement. Emily’s answer to why do we bless the bad in life was, “With each difficult experience comes a positive outcome and a stronger person.” Maybe it is God’s way to help us appreciate what we have.
**MIDDLE SCHOOL - THIRD PLACE**

*Simone Obadia*

- Pardes Jewish Day School, Phoenix

A silhouette of a tree is in front of a brilliantly colored sunset. A camouflaged mask is hidden within the branches of the tree. The artist comments that God blends into our surroundings and that without color, the world would be a darker place. Strong use of line, contrast and composition.

**HIGH SCHOOL - THIRD PLACE**

*Liana Greenberg*

- Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton

Liana Greenberg’s art is highly evocative and creative. Moreover, her artist statement ties the piece together and is a good example of artistic commentary. Liana contends that God alone knows the workings of the universe and that the random occurrences of luck and hardship can not be fully understood by us. Therefore, we must bless both the good and the bad in life.
RAVSAK Art Contest

**MIDDLE SCHOOL - HONORABLE MENTION**

Lauren Gold  
• Hillel Academy of Tampa

**HIGH SCHOOL - HONORABLE MENTION**

Lexi Smith  
• Frankel Jewish Academy, Detroit

**MIDDLE SCHOOL - HONORABLE MENTION**

Melody Eckert  
• Hillel Academy of Tampa

**HIGH SCHOOL - HONORABLE MENTION**

Shiran Mayron  
• Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton
Note on transliteration: our goals are 1) to make the transliteration simple to pronounce for non-Hebrew speakers, while 2) enabling Hebrew readers to decode as much as possible. Here are a few of our choices: double letter = dagesh (a point) in the Hebrew letter; h at end = final heh; apostrophe = ayin (’) or aleph (’) only, not a shva; shva = e or not transliterated, depending if it is pronounced; ch = chet, kh = kof and kuf.

Terms for Prayer

Avodah she-balev (“service of the heart”): a Talmudic expression for prayer, to distinguish it from the service of God through sacrifices

Daven: a Yiddish term for prayer (origin obscure)

Iyyun tefillah (“study of prayer”): educating about the prayers, as opposed to engaging in the ritual of prayer; from the word ayin, eye

Kavannah (“intention”): a term referring broadly to putting personal meaning into prayer; also refers to a specific thought the pray-er should have while reciting a specific prayer; from the verb lekhavein, to aim

Keva (“something fixed”): the scripted prayer of Jewish ritual

Matbe’a tefillah (“the coin of prayer”): the specific text of Hebrew prayer

Minyan (“a count,” pl. minyanim): loosely, a prayer service, so-called because of the count required to conduct a full service (traditionally, ten men over the age of 13); “to make a minyan” is to participate in the number required for the service

Nusach (“formulation”): the version of prayer conducted by a community; traditional nusachs include Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Sephard (Chassidic, adapted from Sephardi), Italian, Yemenite, and Romaniote (from Greece)

Piyut: a liturgical poem, often written for inclusion in the prayer service

Tefillah (pl. tefilat): the most common Hebrew word for prayer, from the root p-l-l, to hope or long for, also to counsel or judge. One who prays is mitpallel (pl. mitpallelim).

Prayer Paraphernalia

Beit knesset (“house of assembly”): Hebrew for synagogue

Leyn (“read”): a Yiddish term widely used to refer specifically to reading from the Torah; the Hebrew equivalent is kri’at haTorah, and a Torah reader is called a ba’al koreh (a master reader)

Shaliach tzibbur (pl. shlichei tzibbur; “agent of the public”): prayer leader

Shivah (“seven”): the weeklong period of mourning immediately following burial

Shivah minyan: a prayer service in the home of one sitting shivah

Shuckel (Yiddish “to shake”: vehement swaying during prayer

Shul (“school”): Yiddish-English for synagogue

Synagogue: Jewish house of prayer, from Greek “assembly” (cf. beit knesset)

Tallit (pl. tallitot): a four-cornered garment with ritual fringes (tzitzit) threaded at the corners, worn over clothing during prayer service

Tallit katan (“little tallit”; also called arba kanfot, “four corners,” or tzitzit, “fringes”): a four-cornered garment with ritual fringes usually worn under the shirt throughout the day

Tefillin: leather boxes attached to straps, containing small parchment scrolls, worn usually by men during weekday morning services

Specific Prayers

Amidah (“standing”): the central Jewish prayer, usually recited silently while standing

Brakhah (“blessing”): a unit of prayer, exhibiting the formula beginning “Barukh Ata...” Blessed are You; from the root berakh, knee

Hallel (“praise”): a series of Psalms recited on holidays and Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the month)

Kaddish (“sanctification”): prayer offering praise of God, recited several times as a form of punctuation between sections of the service

Kaddish yatom (lit. “orphan’s Kaddish”): a Kaddish recited by a mourner during services; people mourning for a parent traditionally “say Kaddish” every day for 11 months after the death and once a year on the “yahrzeit,” the anniversary of the parent’s passing

Ma’ariv (also called Aravit): evening service

Minchah (lit. “gift”): afternoon service

Misebeirach (“He who blessed”): the first words of the prayer for the sick (as well as other prayers)

Pesukei deZimra (Aramaic, “verses of song”): introductory section to Shacharit, focusing on praise of God

Selichot: penitential prayers recited during the High Holiday season

Shacharit: morning prayer

Shema (“Hear”): the prayer acclaiming Jewish faith in God’s unity

Shmonah Esrei (“eighteen”): a term for the Amidah, which originally had 18 blessings (a 19th was added later)

Tachanun (pl. tachanunim): a section of supplicatory prayers recited at Shacharit and Minchah; more generally, prayer as a mode of supplication to God
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The excitement is building!
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