

# Real Siddur Teaching

## What I Know About Prayer Education

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Let's start with a simple definition. Real Siddur Teaching is instruction that leads to students choosing to involve themselves in communal Jewish prayer in a regular way—later in their life. Simply put, our number one goal—above and beyond everything else—is that a significant number of our students grow up to become service-attending members of our congregations. Any goals that fall below that single vision should be regarded as enabling steps and not the real focus. In what we often settle for in "the real world" we trade the development of a dynamic Jewish skill for two lesser concerns.

Far too often, schools settle for either:

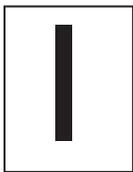
- (a) students who develop a facility for mechanically sounding Hebrew texts; or
- (b) students who can satisfy the entry level requirements of Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutors.

Both of these might lead successful one day lifecycle experiences, but neither is likely to significantly contribute to an individual student's Jewish self-actualization or lead to the survival of the Jewish people.

Sharim is a study of the Boston's Jewish Family Education Initiative, done between the Commission on Jewish Continuity, Boston; Bureau of Jewish Education's Center for Educational Research and Evaluation; and the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University. It suggests two important truths. First, that Bar and Bat Mitzvah experiences do little to deepen the Jewish commitments or practices of Jewish Families. Second, that the programs we build around Bar/Bat Mitzvah experiences as an attempt to impact family value and behavioral choices also make little impact expect perhaps in the arena of increasing participation in adult education. Believing that good Bar/Bat Mitzvah performances will lead to the development of good Jews is not a wise choice.

## **Elements that Make a Difference**

Our research at Torah Aura has suggested that five elements are most likely to impact a learner's relationship to the liturgy. (1) Facility at performing or participating in the actual liturgy used in the student's congregational life; (2) Hebrew language tools that allow students to approximate the meaning of liturgical passages; (3) Knowing the structure of the liturgy and the role each prayer services in the process of the service; (4) Knowing the story of each prayer and understanding most liturgical moments as reenactments of high points in the spiritual history of the Jewish people; and (5) a set of experiences of participation of liturgical moments that both form spiritual community and invite personal transformation.



### ***Facility at performing or participating in the actual liturgy used in the student's congregational life.***

These days, people who make the curricular choices for Hebrew Schools tend to be caught in a tug-of-war between the needs of B'nai Mitzvah trainers and that which is in the long term interests of the Jewish people. By-in-large, the long term interests of the Jewish people are losing. One false assumption on which all of this is predicated is the fallacy that fluent "mechanical" sounding of Hebrew is a high level skill and should be the central focus of a Jewish education. Here are a few basic truths.

- Other than the preparation of Torah and Haftarah portions, most Jews will never have to sight read a Hebrew passage in their adult lives.
- The liturgical lives of most Jews depend on the ability to perform somewhere between ten and twenty Hebrew prayers in synagogue—and then perhaps another twenty pieces of

liturgy outside of synagogue—most of which are one line blessings.

- If we enable our students to perform core Jewish liturgy in Hebrew, we give them the ability to participate in Jewish life much more significantly than if we give them the ability to sound out new pieces of Hebrew at a reasonable rate.
- Hebrew sounding is not an insignificant skill, and should be part of the cycle of things we work on, but its role has been overemphasized, and the curriculum distorted to work on it excessively.
- Mechanical sounding is a skill that is good for part-to-whole linear processors who are visual in their learning style. Oral learners, who can succeed at other forms of mastery, will not be as good at it. Whole-to-part learners, who work from contextual clues, will not be as good at it. About one third of students will have great difficulty at this kind of mastery—just because of their learning styles—and so an over reliance here just emphasizes failure at skills that are not central.

The bottom line is this. The single most important thing a Hebrew School can do for our students long term Jewish survival—and by Hebrew School, I do mean the "Hebrew part" of Jewish education—is give them the tools to actively participate in Jewish communal worship. Sounding out their Torah portion well the first time is nice, but just doesn't carry the same life long impact. In fact, sounding is not even number two on the list—meaning is.



### ***Hebrew language tools that allow students to approximate the meaning of liturgical passages.***

In ancient times, like the 1950s when I went to a Reform Hebrew school the unheard of three

times and seven-and-a-half hours a week, we used to translate prayers. We were expected to conjugate verbs, know tenses and "binyanim," explain the difference between active and passive constructions—and know lots of vocabulary. We were never very good at it then—though other schools may have been more successful than mine—but today those expectations are way beyond anything a school might even unreasonably fantasize.

A few years ago I had a jump-out-of-the-bathtub-naked actual "Eureka!" experience. I was working on the problem of teaching liturgy when I remembered an old 1950s movie, *The Happy Year*, starring Louis G. Carol as the teacher, the Old Roman, and Dean Stockwell as the kid, John Humperdink 'Dink' Stover. At a critical moment in the film, the kid needs to pass an exam in Latin or he will be flunked out of school. At that point, the smartest kid in the class, Great Big Man "Joshua Mountgomery" Hungry Smeed, helps him cheat by wiggling his ears one way if it is an adjective and another way if it is a noun. When the teacher catches on, and removes the signal giver from the room, Dean Stockwell still aces the oral exam because in the process of rehearsing the cheat he has assimilated the language patterns. That late night in the tub, I realized that we could teach students to recognize patterns and "approximate" translations without ever fully mastering the language. We now have ten years of experience working with that process, that we have labeled "the approximation of meaning," and know that it makes a difference.

Simply put, when students recognize roots that they know, lots of words in the Hebrew text become their friends rather than blank strangers. When students know a few beginning and endings of words, they get a sense of what the Hebrew means and feel a connection to the text rather than alienated by it. All Torah Aura

liturgy teachers know the feeling of sitting next to one of their Alef or Bet students as they look at a siddur they are barely able to read—and point out words that they know. That sense of accomplishment and connection is powerful.

Approximation of translation works like this. We give the students the following elements.

Root: B R Kh = "bless"

Word: Et = is a place holder that indicates a direct object

Word: YHVH = God's name

Word: L'Olam = "cosmos" (world/eternity)

Word: Va'ed = "and more"

Word element: ha = "the"

We then give students the text of the Barekhu:

Barekhu et Adonai ha-M'vorakh

Barukh Adonai ha-M'vorakh l'Olam Va'ed.

When we ask students to work out their best guess of the meaning of this passage (true "decoding") they come up with translations that reads something like this:

Bless God the Blessed.

Bless God the Blessed forever and more.

These are not perfect translations—but they do three things that are radical:

- a. Teach that Hebrew can be understood.
- b. Evolve a skill at looking for patterns in Hebrew texts.
- c. Build Hebrew vocabulary through application and repetition (rather than memorization/short term memory loading).

Here is the deep truth. (1) In the limited time we have we are not going to teach most of our students to precisely understand what the Hebrew prayers say, but (2) that does not mean that they must remain blank black boxes that have no meaning. We can give them the tools

to get a sense of what the prayers mean—to "approximate" their meaning—and that can make a big difference in their ability to bond with and use the liturgy.

### 3

#### ***Knowing the structure of the liturgy and the role each prayer services in the process of the service.***

Think of a service as being a lot like a steeplechase. In order to run a good race, you need to walk the course first. You need to plan your three steps here, turn and make a run there. You just can't do well blind if you don't know which way to lean at each point.

The rabbis engineered the service in a careful pattern. The Reform Movement, who more radically edited the service in their adaptation of it, paid very careful attention to pattern and rhythm. In order to give our students a fair chance of making it through the service as a meaningful and significant experience, we need to walk them through the course and give them a good idea of where to step and which way to lean.

This is material that has often been kept out of the North American Jewish community because teachers have never studied it. It has become part of the "because at one point it wasn't taught—it now won't be taught" club that impacts much of what we do. Like many elements of Jewish life, it wasn't taught, because the rhythms of the service were self-evident to those who participated regularly. Now, when these rhythms are not organic, the "Arthur Murray Patterns" are useful guidelines.

What this means is that you may need to allow teachers to learn (with a rabbi, an educator, or local teacher) the patterns of the Siddur in order to enable their students to be enriched by these insights. The actual curriculum is easy:

(1) The anatomy of a Brakhah: The Barukh, the Shem, and the Malkhut. (2) The way that long and short Brakhot build into Brakhah chains. (3) The basic service sections and the ways they are put together: Birkot ha-Shahar, P'sukei d'Zimra, Shema u'virkhoteha, Amidah, The Torah Service, Hallel, and the Concluding service. (4) The way that these elements are assembled into Shaharit, Mussaf, Minhah, and Ma'ariv. (5) Add in Kabbalat Shabbat, Birkat ha-Mazon, Havdalah, and a few other odds and ends.

If any of the terms used in the paragraph above are unknown to you—demand to be taught. Ask your rabbi, your cantor, your educator, your teacher to explain and expand. Stand on one foot and ask.

EVIDENCE OF UNDERSTANDING: When asked how much more of the service there is, students respond: "Just the concluding service," or "Just Aleinu, Kaddish, and a couple of songs," and not "Eight more pages."

### 4

#### ***Knowing the story of each prayer and understanding most liturgical moments as reenactments of high points in the spiritual history of the Jewish people.***

This will probably be the hardest of the five steps to understand. The hardest kind of material to communicate to teachers is content they never experienced as students—and this material will be new to most of you. It is rooted in good Talmudic and Midrashic understandings, but it is still new to most of us, since it is not the way we have been taught.

The rabbis believed that the Siddur was a lot like the script that an actor uses. For them, prayer was the capturing of a moment when the Jewish people had a unique experience of the Divine. When we use the Siddur (and can read it in the

context of the stories of these moments) we can be just like actors using our own experiences to recreate the moments they capture. The Siddur is really an opportunity to relive the most important moments of the Jewish experience. Here is an example.

There is a beautiful midrash in Genesis Rabbah which is told to explain the origin of the Shema and the response line which traditionally follows it (Barukh Shem K'vod Malkhuto l'Olam Va-ed.): As Jacob lay dying, he expressed his concerns to the twelve sons gathered around him, that they would forsake The ETERNAL, the God of the patriarchs and matriarchs, and pursue the multiple gods of idolatry. The sons answered their father (whose name had been changed to Israel after that mysterious wrestling match in Genesis) with the words we know as the Shema: "Listen, Israel, the ETERNAL is our God; the ETERNAL is the Only One." Reassured, Jacob whispered, "Blessed be The NAME Whose Glorious Kingdom is forever and ever."

When we know this story, the Shema changes. It has the capacity to become our story. We get to become Israel's sons. We get to become Jacob. And, we get to make the Shema our story. It works like this. The Shema in the story is the words said by children to assure their parents that the future is safe in their hands. We all need to make that kind of testimony. We have both real and imaginary conversations with our parents about the things we share—about the way we try to turn the past into the future. Likewise, we all have conversations with our children—conversations real and conversations imaginary—about the way we hope that they will turn our dreams into the future. When we know the story, when we understand that part of the one-ness of the Shema involves passing the experience of God from one generation to another, our saying of the Shema becomes a different kind of work. It is no longer just a question of theology (there is

only one God), but it becomes an experience of growing spiritual truth. Our experience of God links generations.

One critical part of entering into Jewish worship is helping our students to make the traditional liturgy into evolving personal stories. The rabbis modeled this process through the use of "origin stories." By teaching us the first time each prayer was said, they were revealing the other contexts in which these words take on and grow meaning. We can do the same for our students. Even though it often wasn't done for us, we can learn and teach these stories, using them to empower our students' relationship with the Siddur.

5

***A set of experiences of participation of liturgical moments that both form spiritual community and invite personal transformation.***

This last element isn't the one that you find in most teacher's guides:

It is a Thursday morning service in Tzofim, the camping division at Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute. Rabbi Larry Mahrer is leading services. Between prayers he asks one of the counselors to go and take a look. The counselor runs out of the outdoor sanctuary, runs to the flag pole and returns and says, "Sorry Rabbi, it's not at the flagpole." The congregation sings the next prayer and then the Rabbi sends another counselor who comes back and says, "I'm sorry Rabbi it is not at the fire circle." In the course of the service four or five counselors make the journey. When it comes time to read Torah, the Rabbi begins to read and translates: "Deuteronomy 30.12. The Torah is not in heaven, that you should say: 'Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?'" He then explains, "The Torah is not in the kitchen, not at the flag pole, not at the fire circle—where the Torah needs to be is in each of

your hearts...”

It was more than thirty years ago when I was one of the counselors who sat in the service, but not one who ran out to report where the Torah was not. Thirty years, and I still remember the moment vividly. It was a little piece of dramaturgy that made the Torah reading and the abstraction of the Torah being in our hands—concrete.

The fifth grade day school class (I wish I remembered where) goes into the art room and finds a hug pile of pipes, wires, wood and of course duct tape. The assignment is to trace one member of their group, cut out a cardboard form and then build the insides of a person. What emerges are a series of very interesting abstract sculptures. This series of engineering activities are artistic solutions that are lots of fun. The sculptures are taken back to the classroom. They are mounted on the walls and then presentations are made. The teacher then has students open their Siddurim to the following passage, “Blessed is The One who has formed people in wisdom and created in them many orifices and many cavities. It is fully known before the throne of Your glory that if one of them should be [improperly] opened or one of them closed it would be impossible for a person to stand before You.”

In order to get to the “spirit” of worship, a collection of unique experiences are often really useful. Built into worship learning process needs to be a series of moments that get past the mind and into the soul. Unless we help students to connect the words and their hearts, those circuits may never be connected.

But this is only the Kavanah (spirit) side of a duality that also needs to include Keva (fixed patterns). The final part of what schools have to do is involve students in regular services that are compelling. This means not boring, but also not reduced to only cheerleading motions

and shouting. We need to have some serious conversations about the worship patterns that engage children of different ages and show them that prayer can be a useful part of their lives. We need to think about school services and junior congregations, family worship and even our congregational worship patterns, and evolve them into moments of growth.

The bottom line is this: Important pieces of prayer learning needs to happen in the classroom. There are things to know, things to understand, and things to get good at. But, at the same time, to grow students with a long term relationship with the siddur there are things that need to take place in the sanctuary, the art room, the dance floor, and the forest. Our conversations about teaching liturgy also needs to include these experiences.



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