

# Preface

If you had asked me, when I was a teenager, why I didn't regularly attend synagogue services, the answer would have been quick and decisive: it's BORRRing!

And I actually enjoyed services more than most. I liked Hebrew and singing; they sparked memories of the fun I had at Jewish summer camp. For ethnic reasons, I was really into being Jewish, and Jews gathered at synagogues.

But my list of complaints was far more compelling. I could mouth the Hebrew, but for the most part, I could not understand it. I didn't know what I prayed when I prayed it, only afterwards when I read the translation. And after reading the translation, I often felt that it would have been better if I had never looked. Why do people think that praising God is such a great thing to do, as if God, being God, needs us to suck up and "worship" Him? Wasn't *worship* the term for a pagan's relation to an idol or an immature person's relation to a rock star? And why "Him" instead of "Her"?

And who was this God, who did miracles that I knew were impossible, like splitting the Red Sea? Why would the prayer book try to impress me by making such a big deal out of something so unbelievable, and then brag about saving us by recounting the drowning of an army's worth of Egyptians? The prayers were written a long time ago for a very different audience.

All the personal petitions are phrased in "we" language rather than "I" language, as if they, too, knew better than to ask for personal attention. "Want to cure disease?" we thought in the late sixties and early seventies. "Then put your faith in university research hospitals." So soon after the Holocaust, the idea of a God who looks out for righteous individuals, indeed any individuals, was clearly folly.

The creative English readings were often interesting. At least, the first one was. By the third creative reading, my mind was elsewhere. And if I had read it a few times before at previous services, my attention was gone from the start. I was taught to be independent, to value individuality, to be authentic; that is, to do things because I knew that they were right and true. And here I was, reading prayers—the thoughts of someone else—in unison with a hundred other people.

No one talked about God. Not even the rabbi pretended that we were there to pray to this God that few believed in. Like most of us, I was there not because of the prayers but despite them. There was a perverse logic at play. If I do something so clearly unenjoyable as plodding through the service, I'm really demonstrating my loyalty to the Jewish community. Why else suffer through this?

The best part of the service was the sermon, because our rabbis knew better than to talk about anything spiritual. Instead, they spoke about politics, Israel, saving Soviet Jewry, Vietnam. The times were hot, and so were we. And then there was the *oneg* after services. Lots of brownies, plenty of friends, and, most fun of all, Israeli dancing. There were rewards for our suffering. But not enough to draw me to services when I didn't have to go.

## Thirty-Five Years Later

Today, when I'm not spending Shabbat in nature, I attend a traditional egalitarian service with a full Torah reading. It takes more than three hours, but I do not wear a watch and it never ends too late for me.

If I'm really good, I rise early enough to meditate before leaving for services. On the drive over, I sing Jewish chants with my wife, Jody.

I enter the "sanctuary." It has no stained glass windows, no elaborate ark, no fancy pews; it is just a meeting room at a community center, some folding chairs around a few tables on a simple tile floor. I am happy to see my friends, the people who will

be there for me in hard times, as I will be for them; the people whose singing and dancing transformed my recent wedding.<sup>1</sup>

Even though I am a bit late, I go back to the first prayers in the prayer book, the Siddur, because they are my favorites. I bless the *tallit*, feel it drop over my shoulders, and pray the morning blessings. Then I join in the singing during the first part of the service, largely psalms. In between songs, when others are praying the words of the psalms, I close my eyes and sink into a basic meditation. I put all of my attention on my body.

As I sit quietly or sing songs from the psalms that I know by heart, my mind empties and my body relaxes more and more. I do not talk to others. I focus on listening—to the singing and to my heart. Body awareness is critical. Where the body goes, the mind mirrors and the heart flows. It is not mysterious or difficult or in any way esoteric. It's just another way of being in the world. My body feels a certain way when happy, a different way when angry or stressed. This is how my body feels when I'm open and present, ready to feel God's presence. In the words of Jewish mystics, I am the empty vessel that God's spirit might fill. More important, I am familiar enough with this state that I can get there anytime I make the effort.

With the *Barchu* prayer I bring my focus back to the prayers. I read them in a state of relaxed concentration, allowing the prayers in this section to do their job: to center me, to remind me of my place in the world in relation to God, nature, humanity, and the Jewish People. If a particular verse strikes me, I stop and dwell on it for a bit.

As the *Shema* prayer enjoins me, I continue to listen for what God may be sending my way this morning. Awareness still on my body, I feel the spirit of my fellow daveners, my fellow pray-ers. I soak up their energy, which energizes me. As I sink deeper into this unstressed, peaceful state of being, my better emotions naturally emerge. I remember why I married my wife. I feel love for her and for my friends, and for the people in this room whom I don't know at all. I even remember how important it is to show a little love for myself.

As we approach the *Mi Chamocha* prayer, I take a moment to think back over the week that has passed since last Shabbat. I do a quick internal check-in. Am I taking care of myself, getting what I need, treating others well, living a life of service?

The prayers themselves at this point, about God splitting the Red Sea, I find problematic. So I forget the particulars and go for the general. This prayer is about redemption. As we sing it, I lose myself in the music and ask: What would redemption look like in my life in the next week? How would I change the way I go about things? I try to think small. Could I greet a barista with a smile instead of my usual morning scowl? Could I pay just a little more attention to someone in my life?

Everything comes into focus as I take three steps back, then three forward, and begin the *Amidah* prayer by saying, “*Adonai sefatai tiftach*” (O God, open my lips). During the week, I would pray my requests amid the traditional prayers. It is not difficult. After a half hour or so of listening, I usually know what I need, and when you know what you need, you know what to ask for—what to put out in the world that you hope will be fulfilled. But it is Shabbat, and according to the tradition, even God, as it were, has the day off. So I refocus on my body and just experience the grand emotions that are now filling my soul. I pray the words of “just being,” the biblical quotes that proclaim the holiness of the Sabbath.

In this alert but somewhat trance-like state, I am in touch with the big picture of what it means to live a human life: the grandeur, the tragedy, the dreams, the pain, the mystery.... Like clockwork, gratitude wells up, and the tradition knows, for it places my favorite gratitude prayer, *modim anachnu lach* (we thank you), right at this juncture. I thank God not for achievements or any of the larger things I am grateful for, but for the gift that comes in the simplest form, my breath.

The *Amidah* ends, the Torah service begins, and my mind kicks in again for the intellectual endeavor of reading Torah, but in this contemplative state, I soak it in before I start analyzing

things. I work less at “understanding” and first try to “hear,” to really listen to the words as if for the first time. As a person who naturally loves learning and philosophizing, this part of the service comes easiest to me. I eagerly await the insights of my fellow members of the minyan, one of whom will give a *d’var Torah*, a sermon, on the weekly Torah portion.

Being a Reform rabbi, I have many reasons for dropping *Musaf*, the repetition of the *Amidah* after the Torah reading. But my soul wants to continue in “prayer consciousness,” to tap into and to extend the invigorating energy that is enlivening my body and relaxing my mind. A good prayer session builds, and now that I have spent two hours locating the best of myself—intellect, body, and heart—I am ready for my best praying.

I don’t relate much to the words, the details of the sacrifice offered on Shabbat more than two thousand years ago in the Temple. But the theme is compelling, the climax of the whole morning. What am I willing to sacrifice for God? What am I willing to give to make the world a better place? Again, I think about what I can really do. What bad habit can I try to let go this week? What can I give to my loved ones? How can I respond better to an imperfect world? Calm and alert, but emotionally raw and defenseless, I offer my heartfelt prayer to make this life a good one.

The service thematically concludes with the *Aleynu*, the prayer for harmony and peace in the world. Filled with sadness and joy, I pray. If only it could really be!

Services aren’t as lovely as I have described here every time, but neither is this an occasional happening that I attribute to the alignment of the stars, the luck of the draw or to a martyr-like perseverance (pray enough and occasionally something special will transpire). This is what happens most of the time. It does not depend on anything or anyone else but me. Usually I feel like God is really there; sometimes not. But when I make myself truly ready to receive God, it is always worth the effort. Getting in touch with my noblest emotions, and reaching toward the best aspirations of a human life, is its own reward.

## Becoming a Prayer-Person

What a difference a few years makes! (Okay, a few decades, but who's counting.) What changed for me?

For years I attended services, when I attended services, because I liked the music, identified with the community, enjoyed seeing friends, and relished a good sermon and Torah discussion. Good reasons, indeed, but today all that is secondary for me. Now my central goal is to slow down, make some space for God, listen, and respond. My purpose is to interact with the Holy One.

Pursuing a direct relationship with God, something to which few liberal Jews of my generation aspired, brought me to the critical insight that changed my relation to prayer.

No one else can truly pray for me.

My prayer life changed when I took ownership of it and no longer left my heart's expression in the hands of rabbis, cantors, the Siddur, the building architect, the community, or whether a baby happens to be crying in the sanctuary today.

The Hebrew words *ani tefillab* appear in Psalms 109:4. Literally, they read, "I prayer," or in proper English, "I am prayer." Clearly this is an expression, and the phrase is translated "I am all prayer,"<sup>2</sup> or "I have nothing but prayer."<sup>3</sup> But I like to take the translation literally in order to make a Midrash, a poetic interpretation. To say "I prayer" is to say "I am a prayer-person."

Exactly what constitutes a prayer-person is a broad question; it is the subject matter of this book. But for now, let me propose a working definition. A prayer-person is one whose very life is a prayer, a form of heightened awareness for whom the skills of prayer are a means to a life of virtue, joy, and service.

## Personal Ownership

Over a seven-year period, I led High Holiday services for the Jewish Community of Jackson Hole in Wyoming. Overall, it was a wonderful experience that I treasure and look back on with joy.

But like most human endeavors, it was not all fun. Every summer, when it came time to gear up for Rosh HaShanah, I suffered an initial wave of depression. Partly it was the terror of writing two major sermons. But mostly it was the thought of leading services.

During the year, I loved the services that I was privileged to lead. Over the months, the regulars studied Hebrew, learned the prayers, mastered the melodies, and further developed the wonderful sense of community that only grows in a place with so few Jews. At some point in every service, I would close my eyes, stop singing, and just listen. Whereas only a few people sang when I first arrived, now I bathed in a full congregational chorus. Amid my friends, I could relax. As the prayer leader, managing a public ceremony for tens of people, it is often impossible to let go and pray. But instead of the congregation getting in the way, I was lifted by their participation and singing. I was one fortunate rabbi.

Then came the High Holidays. The regulars were outnumbered by “once-a-year” Jews who didn’t know the music, didn’t know the liturgy, and didn’t care much for prayer. The focus would not be on the prayers; it would be on the clergy.

While we all like a talented prayer leader, clergy-centered services are problematic. If I go to services expecting the rabbi to impress me with her words and the cantor to move me with his musicianship, I am like a critic at a movie. When a good film touches me, I am spiritually enriched. If not, not. It mostly depends on the film. But if I pray like a painter about to draw on her canvas, I am responsible for finding my inspiration and engaging the practice. My prayer may not always turn out great, but even “failure” moves me forward in the artistic quest. The critical point: it depends mostly on me—my longing, my desire, my creativity, my talent, my sincerity, my devotion to the art. We have a choice: to consume art or to become an artist; to consume the synagogue product or to become a prayer-person, an artist of the soul whose sincere prayer serves the community as much as the community supports our prayer.

“Once-a-year” Jews are more like moviegoers, waiting to be moved and entertained by a liturgical performance that was never designed to entertain anyone. Partly by adopting the theater-style seating of the general culture, often because we do not know what to do if left to our own devices, most liberal North American Jews depend on the rabbi and the cantor to give them a good and satisfying experience. If attendance figures are an indication, it does not happen very often.

So there I was leading High Holiday services, struggling with what so many rabbis experience today. Most congregants are comfortable with neither the traditional prayers nor prayer in general. But I am bound to this liturgy and we are here to pray. Give me a few months of class time and I know that I can help the people sitting in the pews before me. But they are not interested enough in prayer to attend a class. (Considering their experience so far, who can blame them?) So I lead prayers that I know most find boring, and there is little I can do to soften the blow.

I know that responsive reading in English is a spiritual dead end for most, but this is the only tool I have to engage most of my congregants during the service. I read to them, and they read to me in robust, earnest voices. They think I like this and apparently want to appear as if they enjoy it, too. In reality, of course, I know that we are all suffering and far from God, but I don’t know what else to do. At least some of them might find a moment of inspiration that would not be available if we droned on in Hebrew the whole time.

The most these congregants can do is listen to the music (thank God for our wonderful lay cantor) and wait to see if they like the sermon. Depressing for them, depressing for me.

## Toward a New Paradigm

Better music, better sermons, and better prayer books can only go so far. Many innovations have been tried around the world, and no doubt synagogue leadership will continue to think creatively about