

Erev YK: How do we find meaning in traditional liturgy?

Sometimes you get inspiration where you least expect it. In this case, I have to thank a congregant for the inspiration behind my words today. For the sake of anonymity, I'll call this congregant Robin, a name that can be ascribed to either a male or female.

Whether it was coincidence or Divine Intervention, Robin's question was delivered to me on a day when I was becoming particularly anxious about coming up with ideas for High Holiday Sermon topics (actually a task that begins plaguing me around Pesach, but grows in urgency around mid-June). Did I mention that it was mid-June?

Robin was engaged in a "liturgical crisis," and confessed, "For the longest time, I have felt very uninspired by not only the (Shabbat) liturgy, but also the High Holiday liturgy. I find the language both archaic and non-spiritually moving. I suppose if I found comfort in the words, it would be better for me but I don't and they don't comfort me."

These thoughts really resonated with me. And to be honest, I wasn't quite sure even how to respond, as I, too, struggle with the liturgy every single time I open a siddur!

And I suspect that many, if not most of us, are similarly challenged at one time or another, if not regularly. I needed to come up with some answers, for all of us.

So here's the ultimate question: How do we pray using a text that seems foreign to us, either by virtue of the fact that it's in a language we don't understand, or espouses theology that we don't necessarily embrace? In short, how do we modern-day worshippers reach across the expanse of both distance and time to find meaning and relevance in the traditional words and ideas of the prayer book?

Before we can ask ourselves how the siddur or mahzor can help us become more engaged in the prayer experience, however, I think it's important to think about the purpose of prayer itself. When we pray, what are we doing exactly? And what, if anything, do we hope that prayer will do for us?

As with most everything Jewish, there are multiple answers! To me, prayer is **connection**. The Hebrew word for Prayer, Tefillah, comes from the word "l'hitpalel" which means "to judge oneself" - discovering who we are, and what we need to do to become our most authentic selves. Prayer is a means of connecting with the Divine within us.

But it's also about connecting with the Divine outside of us – to the Source of all Creation, to each other in community, and to all that has been created in our world.

Prayer to God can take the form of gratitude, acknowledgement of miracles, or asking for guidance and help. Communal prayer connects us to each other, reminds us that we are all a part of the same family, and in remembering that, in hearing each others' voices lifted up to God, we are strengthened.

So how does engagement with our prayer book help us to connect when the written text within can actually have the opposite effect? Let's look at some of challenges to connection inherent in the prayerbook. I get this comment a lot: "There's too much Hebrew in the service! Why can't we have more English?" It's a fair question, the assumption being if you can't read or understand Hebrew, you're not going to get much out of the service. I know this firsthand, because I've been there.

I remember that when we first moved to Los Angeles, and went "shul shopping," we ultimately chose a small Conservative synagogue walking distance from our modest West LA apartment –

not because we were observant, but because we found a warm, welcoming community of people who invited us into their homes and taught me everything I didn't know about celebrating the holidays. Which was a lot! I admit, growing up I didn't even realize that Shabbat was on Saturday! On occasion we would light candles before going to the movies. We rarely attended Friday night services, and our synagogue only had Shabbat morning services when there was a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. We only consistently went to Temple on the High Holy Days. I had no idea what it meant to be Kosher. I never attended Hebrew School, and thus, never had a Bat Mitzvah when I was younger, so Hebrew was, literally and figuratively, a foreign language.

I received quite an education that first year of membership. And as the entire service was in Hebrew, I knew that if I was going to have anything close to a meaningful experience, I had to learn the language. I began studying for an adult Bat Mitzvah, and two years later, I was on the Bimah, and I haven't gotten off since! Now I don't mean to imply that those of you who are Hebrew-challenged should follow the same path! But I do think that basic familiarity with Hebrew is a good thing. Why? It's certainly true that we believe God hears prayer in any language.

But Hebrew is the language of the Jewish people, and it's the language of Torah. It's part of who we are.

Rabbi Reuven Hammer, in his landmark book, "Entering Jewish Prayer," writes, "There is an emotional element that reciting prayer in Hebrew can add even to those who do not comprehend every word. There is a feeling of identification with an ancient tradition and with other Jews wherever they may be which enhances the experience of prayer. There is nothing magical in Hebrew, but there is something culturally meaningful that is lost when traditional prayers are said in other languages."

Imagine chanting the Shema in English. Many people who don't even know an alef from a bet can chant this prayer that isn't even technically a prayer! It's our statement of faith, or Jewish pledge of allegiance. When we say the Shema together, regardless of whether we are reading it in the Siddur, or have simply memorized it, whether we understand every word or not, we become part of something much larger than ourselves, and there is so much power just in that alone. Hearing those words, in our authentic tongue, uttered by a congregation in unison, is a sacred moment for me. I don't even try to project my voice as I usually do when I lead prayer, as I enjoy hearing it as one communal sound. Prayer is **connection**.

Of course, the ideal goal would be to learn Hebrew, and this past year, I've had five eager adult students that are doing just that. They have learned how to read words, and after the Holy Days they will be learning how to read, and understand prayers. For those who aren't ready to take that step yet, Rabbi Hammer suggests, "Learn the vocabulary of prayer. It is possible to study enough about the prayers so that even if you do not understand every word, the main words and phrases will be familiar to you."

After we confront the language, we must then confront the content of the prayers. What if we don't embrace every word? How can we pray the Avinu Malkeinu if we don't envision God as our Father, our King? Every day we chant, (in a very upbeat cheery tune that in my opinion doesn't quite reflect the importance of the sentiments), the words of the G'vurot: "M'chalkeil chayim b'chesed, m'chai meiteem b'rachamim rabim, someich nofleem v'rofei choleem, u'matir asurim – You sustain the living with lovingkindness and with great mercy You bestow eternal life upon the dead. You support the falling, heal the sick, free the captives. You keep faith with those who sleep in the dust."

But what if we aren't comfortable with the whole idea of resurrection? What if our loved one's sickness wasn't healed? And we certainly know that there are a lot of captives out there aren't being freed any time soon. How do we authentically say these words when we find it hard to reconcile them with our own personal theology?

Here are three different approaches:

1. Alter, or add to the text. Let's go back to the G'vurot Prayer, in which we acknowledge our belief in resurrection. In the new Reform Siddur, Mishkan Tefillah, the traditional words "M'chayei HaMeiteem – the One who gives life to the dead" - are in parenthesis, and the words "M'chayei HaKol": the One who gives life to all" is given as an alternative, (I would venture to say preferred) option. It certainly changes the meaning of the blessing, and avoids the whole resurrection issue completely. In our own siddur, we have two texts to choose from when we begin the Amidah: the traditional text, which only includes "Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak, V'Elokei Yaacov: God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob," or that which includes the matriarchs, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. We choose the latter.

Although many feel that there is merit in altering the Hebrew text, the risk in doing so, as Rabbi Neil Gillman states, is that, “the prayer book loses its role as one of the classic, unifying texts of our religious community...the liturgy can no longer be studied as the authentic formulation of the classic Jewish belief structure.” It’s a delicate balance, weighing the importance of preserving classical text vs. reinterpreting that text to make it more accessible to the congregation that will be reading it today. We trust the Rabbinical authorities tasked with this holy work to do so with caution and care.

2. A second option, albeit more a more challenging one, is, as Rabbi Neil Gillman, suggests, “to confront the liturgy as formulated by preceding generations simply because that is what our community teaches, and then to struggle with that tension.” In other words, the text remains unchanged, but we view the prayers in our siddur through the lens of history. Evelyn Garfiel, author of “The Service of the Heart: A Guide to the Jewish Prayer Book,” considers the Siddur to be “the only authentic, original source book of the Jewish religion still comprehensible to Jews.”

It recalls pivotal moments in our history, and holds a mirror up to how our predecessors viewed God and they lived their lives in relationship to God. It is a compilation of sources from Torah, Talmud, Psalms, Poetry and Blessings born in the Rabbinic Era at the beginning of the first century of the common era, and later codified and arranged into the specific order for the worship service utilized today. Rabbi Hammer comments, "One might very well say, then, that to pray is to experience the history of the Jewish people through the eyes of the Rabbinical Sages." *Prayer is memory.*

Seen in this light, I can look at the text and reason that when I speak these words, regardless of whether I embrace every one, I am honoring those who came before me, and the way that they chose to see and deal with a world that was very much beyond their understanding. And I can accept that the role that God played in their lives - that of King, Judge, Father, the God of Punishment as well as Mercy - helped them make sense of and navigate through that world.

We live in a changed world, and we can acknowledge that our understanding of God and how God works in our world can be markedly different.

And yet we can still celebrate, appreciate and be moved by the prayers that were formulated back then, as they are part of our communal experience. As Jews, memory is the thread that ties us all together. We are commanded to remember where we came from, who our ancestors were, what motivated them, what they believed, for that has helped us shape our future. We are inextricably tied to them, and the prayer book is the ultimate daily reminder of that.

3. A third choice is to anchor the text in the traditional Hebrew but write new English interpretive readings that provide a more liberal interpretation which may resonate more clearly with us today.

Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger suggests that we can interpret prayer as poetry, not to be taken literally, but to move, provoke or inspire us.

We can also choose to reinterpret the text based on our own personal understanding of it. Returning once again to our G'vurot example, despite my struggle with the concept of resurrection, I can wholeheartedly state, "Baruch Atah Adomai, M'chayei hameytem: Blessed are you, Adomai, the One who gives life to the dead," because I've seen it taking place on my front porch.

Much as I have tried to improve my gardening skills, I've still managed to kill almost every plant I've owned. With the exception of a cyclamen that has been hanging by a thread for years (with a name that sounds like an antibiotic, it's no wonder), and an ivy that will most likely survive the apocalypse, I don't have a great track record when it comes to plants. But last Spring, when I came out to water what was basically a dry twig in a pot by my door I was delighted to find that, despite my black thumb, it had sprouted one tiny green bud. That, to me, exemplifies M'chayei HaMeiteem.

Every time we pray, we say a Mishabeirach for those who are ill, knowing that a cure might not be possible. Praying for a "refuah sheleimah – a complete healing," doesn't necessarily mean that we are expecting or demanding a cure; we are simply hoping for one. It can mean that we wish for a spiritual healing, acceptance, peace, freedom from pain, an end to suffering.

And even as we chant the Mi Chamocha, recalling how God rescued us at the Sea of Reeds, we don't even need to believe that that miracle literally took place in order to be inspired to become partners with God to create our own modern-day miracles. Prayer is *motivation*.

Engaging and investing in the words in our siddur and mahzor isn't easy. We struggle with the text, but it's in that struggle that we can find inspiration. We discover where we stand in relationship to our ancestors. We retell our story as seen through their eyes. In confronting their theology, as reflected in the prayers we chant, we can help clarify our own. And through that process, "Elokei Avraham, (G-d of Abraham), Elokei Yizchak, V'lokei Yaacov, Elokei Sarah, Elokei Rivka, Elokei Rachel, V'lokei Leah," becomes our God as well. We are free to forge our own unique and personal relationship with God knowing that our ancestors stand beside us when we pray.

On Rosh Hashanah, we can affirm the theme of God's Kingship and hear the powerful words of the Unetanetokef, which say, "On this day, O Lord, we sense Your dominion, as we envision You on the throne of judgement. On Yom Kippur, we can chant Avinu Malkeinu: Our Father our King, imploring God to inscribe us in the Book of Life. We can pound our chests and recite the Al Cheyt, the litany of sins that we own as a community even if we didn't personally commit each one, knowing that the God of Judgement is also a God of Forgiveness and Mercy.

We can do this because we know that these prayers were created out of a narrative of struggle, a struggle to define ourselves as a unique people with One God who in a time when pagan cultures engaged in immoral and brutal practices and worship, challenged us to be a light unto the nations. A God who gave our people rules about ethical and moral behavior, and kept us in line with consequences for those who chose to ignore them. A God who gave the people the hope that they would never be abandoned, and whose promise was kept by virtue of the fact that we stand here today, able and willing to continue their struggle. This story is reflected in the book that you all hold in your hands.

May our liturgy connect us to the holiness within us and around us, may it help forge our memories of the past into our collective consciousness, and may it help motivate us to seek our own path toward understanding God, appreciating what God has given us, helping us to add our voices to the rich legacy that we call our own.

Amen. Please turn to p. 476 for Kaddish Shalem.