Engaging Jewish Spirituality

A Curriculum for Building Prayerfulness in Teens and Young Adults

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Introduction

Description of Topic

This unit is a part of a larger program designed to engage both post-B'nei Mitzvah students and young adult learners in a self-directed search for a more personally meaningful spiritual life through Jewish prayer. This unit focuses on using *chavruta* study partnerships between teens and young adults, helping them to form unique relationships defined by shared Jewish learning, better articulate and advocate for their views on God and prayer, and to inspire both partners to look forward and back in their lives through a spiritual lens. The intent is also to deepen learners' relationship to prayer in general, transform their connection to Jewish prayer texts in particular, and help them to integrate these changes into the larger mosaic of their own diverse activities, interests, and identities.

Setting

This program is intended for use in a Reform synagogue environment. The synagogue should be one in which a structured Religious School program (or analogous learning program) exists, and in which regular *tefillah* occurs. Ideally, the community would be one in which a possibility exists to attend a weekday *minchah* / *ma'ariv* service, for multiple *minyanim* on Friday nights and Saturdays, or for neighborhood *chavurot* who meet regularly for prayer. Learners should have ample opportunities to continue to

experiment with prayer outside of the confines of class meetings.

This curriculum is also not intended to provide a comprehensive knowledge of particular "canon" Jewish prayers. Similarly, the structure of the service and the

Lastly, this curriculum also depends on a supply of interested young adults who are either Jewish or seriously interested in Jewish spirituality. For this reason, the community would also ideally be located in a city with one or more universities, a graduate school, and job opportunities for recent university graduates.

Rationale

> A man came to his rabbi and said: "Rabbi when I was a child I felt very close to God. Now that I am older, it seems as if God has left me, or perhaps it is I who have left. In either case, I feel far from God. I am not sure what to do." The rabbi answered him, "When you teach a child to walk, at first you stand very close. The child can take only one step, and then you must catch him. But as he grows, you move farther and farther away, so that he can walk to you. God has not abandoned you. Like a good parent, God has moved farther away, but is still close by, waiting for you. Now you must learn to walk to God."[1]

It is clear that for many Jewish adults – like the one in this story – a sense of spirituality and nearness to God is something that is not wholly alien to them. They may have experienced it at earlier periods in their lives, perhaps even quite profoundly. Throughout the process of maturing, however, and in intervening years, many adults lose a

[1] David J. Wolpe, *Teaching Your Children About God: A Modern Jewish Approach* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 1.

sense of spiritual awareness and attunement. It is obvious to anyone who has worked with both children and adults in a liberal synagogue in North America that children's religious education makes reference to ideas like God and prayer almost as a matter of course, while programming for adults struggles with these more often. In fact, it sometimes includes them as afterthoughts, or ignores them altogether in favor of more "relatable" topics.

It seems that we expect our children to have an active prayer life to which their learning is intimately connected. This learning formally begins with Consecration and culminates in the child's becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Clearly, however, some foundations are laid before a child ever begins religious school; and just as clearly, important spiritual developments occur after age thirteen.

According to the oft-cited 2013 Pew Research Center study "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Jewish adults in the United States attend religious services with significantly less regularity than their Christian counterparts. Even among self-identified "Jews by religion," the percentage reporting that they attended services never, rarely, or a few times a year came out to 72% – compared with 36% of Protestants, 42% of Catholics, and 49% of the US population as a whole.[2] Across most age groups surveyed, Jewish respondents saying they attended services on an "at least monthly" basis ranged from 22 to 25%; "few times a year/seldom," from 53 to 54%; and "never," 22 to 24%. While the percentage of young adults (respondents aged 18-29) claiming monthly attendance fell in with the other age groups (23%), this group had the lowest rate for "never" (18%). Similarly, the 18-29

[2] Pew Research Center, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" (http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-4-religious-beliefs-and-practices/).

age group had the second highest rate (73%) of Passover Seder attendance, topped only a few points by respondents 65 years of age and older (75%).

All this is despite the fact that the same data suggest that older Jews are actually slightly *more* likely to believe in God than their younger counterparts – 75% percent, versus 68%. While generational trends, zeitgeists, and self-perceptions may all be at play here, the data suggest that even in adulthood, younger Jews are slightly more open than older ones to seeking out spiritual fulfilment in traditional communal worship – even if they are less certain about the existence of God. To draw a conclusion from the broader trends, it seems that these seekers are looking for some kind of spiritual fulfilment and engagement as they enter middle adulthood, but that they do not always find compelling reasons to continue regular prayer practice as an expression of their spiritual identities.

Some researchers, like psychologist Alison Gopnik, suggest that young children's intuitive grasp of "counterfactual" scenarios – remembered, imagined, or anticipated scenarios which are different from what is directly in front of them – and of observed causal relationships between events makes them the excellent learners that they are. She writes: "Even the youngest children already have causal knowledge about the world and use that knowledge to make predictions about the future, to explain the past, and to imagine possible worlds that might or might not exist."[3] Gopnik suggests that these features of our infant and child minds makes us both very imaginative and highly adaptable. We might say that they make us ideally suited to a Heschelian sense of "radical

[3] Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 38.

amazement" – awe at the universe and what we encounter in it. As we grow older, however, acquire more data, and master new skills, our malleability and imagination diminish. Gopnik writes: "In adult life it sometimes feels as if hours and even days can go by when we are on autopilot this way—perfectly functional, walking, talking, teaching, meeting-attending zombies."[4]

Maturation seems to diminish our capacity for awe. We become accustomed to pattern, structure, and "best practices." No wonder, then, that prayer, a creative, awe-filled, spiritual learning experience, is difficult for adults. As Rabbi Nancy Flam writes:

> Culturally, we twenty-first century American Jews suffer from an achievement complex, and consciously or unconsciously assume that there is a "right" way to pray, and assume, as well, that we don't know how to do it "right." … Prayer is a vast territory of possibility, modality, and nuance. Instead of aiming to pray "right," we need to strive to pray "authentically." Conditions for authentic prayer can be set, but each pray-er must make that discovery for herself.[5]

Research also shows us that teenage brains are still quite focused on learning – though it is often a different kind of learning from the sort of skills acquisition that Gopnik's research reveals in younger children. University of Oregon researcher Jennifer H. Pfeifer found in a 2013 study that children in early adolescence begin to demonstrate significantly increased brain activity in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (a part of the brain

[4] ibid., 112.
[5] Mike Comins, *Making Prayer Real: Leading Jewish Spiritual Voices On Why Prayer Is Difficult and What to Do About It* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights , 2010), 94.

associated with the regulation of emotions) when asked questions about how they view themselves. This was a localized spike, however – not matched by increased activity in other thought processes:

> "Neural changes in the social domain were more robust," Pfeifer said. "Increased responses in this one region of the brain from age 10 to 13 were very evident in social self-evaluations, but not academic ones. This pattern is consistent with the enormous importance that most children entering adolescence place on their peer relationships and social status, compared to the relatively diminished value often associated with academics during this transition."[6]

To put it more plainly, teenagers appear to think significantly more than pre-teens about questions like, "Who am I?" and "What sort of person would I be if…?"

Adolescence is a key time of identity formation, and patterns of spiritual engagement reinforced at this stage have a greater likelihood of becoming a part of an adult Jew's identity and regular life. Young adulthood also offers possibilities for developing prayer practices, spiritual reflection, and spiritual inquiry as a part of a still-emerging adult consciousness and adult identity. This curricular unit seeks to take advantage of the flexibility and as-yet un-"fixed" lifestyles, habits, and interests of most young adults. At the same time, it attempts to capitalize on the "momentum" of Jewish learning which teens carry away from their B'nei Mitzvah ceremonies.

[6] "Brain biology tied to social reorientation during entry to adolescence" (http://uonews.uoregon.edu/archive/news-release/2013/4/brain-biology-tied-social-reorientation-during-entry-adolescence).

Finally, this curriculum attempts to use the still-emerging sense of self which characterizes both teens and young adults as a point from which to pursue spiritual reflection. By forming learning relationships with one another, both teens and young adults can reflect back and forward as they think about their own lives and the spiritual direction in which they want to travel. Teens may see in young adults role models to emulate, or people dealing with struggles they would rather *not* have to deal with in another eight or ten years. Young adults, similarly, may see in teens something of themselves at that age and take stock of what has happened in the years since; or they may feel challenged by the sincerity or insight of a teenage learner to probe deeper in their own quest for spiritual authenticity.

Learners

The ideal learners for this unit are teenagers and young adults who fit a general profile. The teens will ideally have become B'nei Mitzvah in the immediate past or within the past two to three years. The young adults are expected to be college students, graduates, or graduate students without a comprehensive command of Jewish sources and practices. They may be Jewish or strongly interested in Jewish spirituality. Because they will be working in close partnerships with teenagers, young adult applicants should be screened to ensure that teens' physical and emotional safety is maintained. Ideally, these young adults would have some background – such as camp experience, youth group experience, or education experience – which attests to their reliability in working with younger age groups or identifying with teens.

The ideal learners are also individuals who want to learn how to pray as individuals and as part of a *kehillah* at the same time. The class should include a variety of ages who can work in tandem with one another without being separated by any major difference in Jewish knowledge. Young teens will enjoy immediate continuity with their ongoing religious education, and this fact may seem to give them an "advantage" in this sense. Adult learners, however, will be able to integrate life experience into their learning, and this fact will provide its own sort of advantage. Ultimately, however, the learners are not in competition with one another, nor are they called upon to be accountable to an objective standard. They are learning *lishmah*, for the learning's own sake, and the only thing to which they are accountable is the development of their own spiritual identities.

This unit of study should be accessible to a variety of learners. The activities used are intended to appeal to different learning styles, and to be appropriate to different learners' levels of technological affinity. Many teens and young adults will feel comfortable using their phones to take pictures of sights they see which pertain to one week's journal prompt, while others might feel more comfortable writing or finding a piece of music for the same assignment. Learners with severe or unmanaged learning disabilities or behavioral disorders may be unable to participate in all of the activities. The facilitator should nevertheless try to make accommodations where possible to include such learners. The opportunity to teach openness, flexibility, and patience in a real-life setting is one all too often missed by religious educators. A unit which focuses on spiritual openness and availability should encourage finding the holy in frustrating or unsettling experiences, without minimizing the reality of the negatives.

Guide for the Facilitator

This unit is designed with certain considerations in mind. Chief among them are the value of interpersonal learning, the need for continuity of experience, and maintaining sensitivity to learner diversity.

INTERPERSONAL LEARNING: CHAVRUTA PARTNERSHIPS

This curriculum makes use of a classic Jewish learning modality: the *chavruta*, or Jewish learning partnership. Ideally, in each *chavruta,* an adolescent will learn with a young adult partner. Together, they will discuss their learning and self-discovery over the course of the year, and they will participate in activities together, including leading prayers.

Setting up *chavruta* partnerships requires significant advance planning. The facilitator should meet with individual participants one-on-one prior to the beginning of the course of study, in order to get to know all participants and try to determine the most appropriate matches for each one. The facilitator should be particularly sensitive to the adolescents' needs. Adolescents are typically more emotionally and spiritually vulnerable than young adults, and due consideration should be given to their emerging senses of self-awareness, self-consciousness, sexuality, and individualism, as well as the potential for feelings of alienation from Jewish community or Jewish learning.

If the composition of the participant pool does not allow for partnerships across age groups, the facilitator may choose to make some matches between adolescents or between

young adults. These matches should be made with consideration of partners' diversity of experience and temperament, and their ability to challenge one another to think in new ways.

CONTINUITY OF EXPERIENCE

At its core, this unit is conceived not simply as ritual education, but as part of a larger program to overhaul the culture of Reform synagogues by cultivating a more meaningful relationship to prayer. One hope is that Jews will find a greater sense of continuity between training up to and including their Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies and a role within the community on the far side of that milestone: confident informed *mitpallelim* ("pray-ers") capable of praying on their own or even leading ritual prayer. Another hope, however, is that the community will come to appreciate such roles as normal – rather than exceptional – for adult or "ritually adult" Jews to occupy. It might even come to see the *sh'liach tzibbur* as an exemplar – but an *everyday* exemplar: a person who embodies an ideal for Jews in this community, who can comfortably join and even lead their fellow Jews in communal prayer without sacrificing personal connectedness.

Jonathan Woocher's 2003 manifesto "Jewish Education in the Twenty-First Century: Framing a Vision," speaks to the need in Jewish educational settings to "think less in terms of programs, and more in terms of pathways."[7] By empowering "Jews in the pews" to pray with greater authenticity, educators are helping to create one such pathway. At the same

[7] Jonathan S. Woocher, "Jewish Education in the Twenty-First Century: Framing a Vision," 31.

time, they are helping religious school and Hebrew school programs to adopt a more intentional backward-design approach by providing an idea of the "end product" of Jewish ritual education – a Jewish adult who is committed, knowledgeable, and connected to prayer.

This unit in particular is crucial in making that transformation a reality. We maintain modest expectations for our B'nei Mitzvah in terms of ritual leadership and engagement. At the same time, B'nei Mitzvah ceremonies are often seen as a crucible and a "final exam" of sorts; we rarely if ever call on young Jews again to try to develop or exhibit a personally meaningful relationship with the prayer service as adolescents or as adults. This curriculum aims to draw them into that sort of relationship, but its lasting success depends on creating a synagogue culture in which this relationship is normed and nurtured.

LEARNER DIVERSITY

Issues of inclusivity and developmental differences are ones to which the facilitator should be attuned. Nevertheless, the lessons are designed to focus attention less on absolute achievement than on relative achievement – and that achievement is very personalized as well. An investigation of the Shema and its themes is not intended to uncover "right" or "wrong" answers, but to help learners discover what *they* feel as individuals when they read a sentence like "Set these words, which I command you this day, upon your heart." Learners should not feel judged for doing work that achieves different results from those of other learners, or even from their *chavruta* partner's; the

work they are doing is internal work, and they are their own evaluators in this regard.

The facilitator should keep in mind as well that different young adults will demonstrate different levels of ability in working with teens. Similarly, teens will differ in from one another in terms of focus, attentiveness, and impulse control – and one teen may even display wildly different behavior from one session to the next. Facilitators may sometimes need to meet with *chavruta* groups separately from the class, or to meet with one learner individually, in order to address particular concerns and pave the way for more productive learning. The facilitator should in any case attempt to meet with each pair outside of class 3-4 times throughout the course of study.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to paying heed to the above, the ideal facilitator will possess:

- Professional training as a Jewish educator, rabbi, or cantor
- Experience leading and adapting "fixed" (*keva*) prayers for worship
- Experience conducting spontaneous prayer
- A relative sense of personal spiritual groundedness, both inside and outside Jewish ritual space
- Completion of one or more units of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), or its equivalent
- Familiarity with Jewish prayer and meditation texts for various occasions (and with some "gaps" that tradition might not fill)

- Recognition of and attention to different spiritual "types" (such as, per Staub's framework: intellectual, devotional, activist, familial, and aesthetic[8])

Finally, the facilitator should be committed to deepening their own prayer practice. The humility to recognize that we are all still learners is a vital component to effective education, especially in the realm of spiritual development.

[8] Jacob J. Staub, "Jewish Spiritual Direction," (http://shma.com/2003/01/jewish-spiritual-direction/).

Outcomes

Organizational Mission

This unit will work well for a synagogue which sees its mission as including:

- Developing spiritually empowered Jews
- Supporting self-directed spiritual journeys

Priority goals for Learners

- Learners will be confident *mitpallelim* ("pray-ers") in formal and informal prayer settings.
- Learners will feel empowered to direct their own Jewish spiritual journeys.

Enduring Understandings

- Jewish prayer is not "one size fits all"
- Each *mitpallel* (pray-er) has an evolving and authentic prayer voice

Essential Questions:

- When do I feel most "awake" spiritually?

- When does Jewish prayer make me feel comfortable, and when does it make me uncomfortable?
- How can I add more meaning to my life through prayer?

Learner Outcomes

NOTICING TARGETS (KDBB)

Know

- Is familiar with the translations of *Shema* and *Amidah* in the community's siddur.
- Knows (or is learning) a private, personal prayer written as an adaptation of elements from Jewish liturgy.

Prompt: What are the main ideas behind *Shema*? Craft a personal prayer or meditation that uses the themes of this prayer that are most meaningful to you personally. Write it on a piece of chipboard/cardstock which you will carry with you and read every day at least once a day until our next session.

Do

- Commits to an evolving practice of reflection and spiritual sensitivity.
- Engages in regular prayer or meditation.

- Shares insights and reflections with *chavruta* partner in and out of scheduled class meetings.

Prompt: Keep a journal (on synagogue website) of your spiritual journey during this unit of learning. Your entries may be photographs you take, images you see, music you hear, creative written pieces, or more traditional journal entries. Between each meeting and the next, share at least one entry (or partial entry) with your *chavruta* partner.

Reflection prompts (samples):

- Make 3 or more entries based on the following verse: "Surely *Adonai* is in this place and I did not know it." (Gen. 28:16)
- Make 3 or more entries, each at the same time of day. Read your personal prayer before you make the entry, and let your entry flow from the prayer.

Believe/Value

- Expresses their own opinion of the mental, physical, and spiritual value of communal and personal prayer.
- Expresses their own sense of what challenges make a regular prayer regime difficult and what their *chavruta* partner can do to help them face these challenges.

Prompt: What do you need in order to "recharge" your spiritual energy? What can that recharging mean for other (non-spiritual) parts of your life or activities?

Belong

- Increases personal connection to a *chavruta* partner.
- Increases relationship with a community of fellow learners who are struggling with the common challenge of developing and maintaining a personal prayer practice.

Prompt: Help your *chavruta* partner plan and lead a prayer activity for the rest of the group.

NOTICING TOOLS

- Journals, curated online through the synagogue website. Each learner will receive a login to post private reflections, URLs, photos, and other media. Private entries will be accessible only to the learner and the facilitator. Each week, learners will be asked to share one entry (via email) with their *chavruta* partners. At the conclusion of the unit, each learner will meet with the facilitator one-on-one to review the journal.
- A collection of prayer activities planned and led by *chavruta* pairs.
- Individual portfolios of artifacts crafted by learners and their partners. Some of these may be used in future community siddur(im) and children's religious education. All learners will receive personal copies to keep as well.
- A booklet, containing a group portfolio of kavvanot, alternative or interpretive readings, original prayers, creative writing, and artwork created by the group as a whole, based on individual and group contributions.

Learner Role in Determining Outcomes

Although the journal prompts and many of the activities in "class" will be provided by the facilitator, learners may exhibit a great deal of creativity in determining how they go about following them. The facilitator should "push" learners to explore certain ideas more deeply – particularly the ones that they seem most passionate about.

The creation of artwork, creative readings, and other artifacts intended for inclusion in the group portfolio at the end of the course will be largely learner-determined. Learners will decide together at the beginning of class what they want to make. They might decide to create a book of prayers for hospital patients or for young children, or a collection of recipes and blessings for food and drink.

21st Century Learning

This unit is intended to balance the depth and richness of Jewish tradition with learners' own sense of what is most immediately relevant or relatable to them. Through the guidance of the facilitator and through thoughtful, compassionate dialogue in *chavruta*, learners will explore ways to connect with this content and to make their own contributions to the treasury of Jewish prayer. Through their journal entries and creative projects, learners will examine and reexamine questions and ideas, relating them to their own unique experiences.

Resources

These resources will help the facilitator better understand the topic of Jewish prayer, its various forms, and traditional ideas about what it is supposed to be. Included are resources on leading prayer, understanding Jewish meditation, and exploring different ideas about God and prayer.

In-Class Activities

Ben David, Aryeh. *The Godfile: 10 Approaches to Personalizing Prayer.* Jerusalem: Devora, 2007.

Goodman, Roberta Louis, and Sherry H Blumberg. *Teaching about God and Spirituality.* Denver, CO: A.R.E., 2002.

Roth, Jeff. *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life: Awakening Your Heart, Connecting with God*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 2009.

Jewish Liturgy

Donin, Hayim. *To Pray as a Jew: A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service*. New York: Basic Books, 1980.

Mishkan T'filah. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007.

Sacks, Jonathan, trans. *[sidur Ḳoren] =: The Koren Siddur*. Bilingual ed. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009.

Perspectives on Prayer

Comins, Mike. *Making Prayer Real: Leading Jewish Spiritual Voices On Why Prayer Is Difficult and What to Do About It*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights , 2010.

Mykoff, Moshe, and S C. Mizrahi. *The Gentle Weapon: Prayers for Everyday and Not-So Everyday Moments*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999.

Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman, and Joel Segel. *Davening: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights , 2012.

Public Prayer

"Davening Tips for Shlichei Tzibbur: Beth El Synagogue, Durham, NC." Accessed March 30, 2015. http://www.betheldurham.org/docs/Tips_for_Beth_El_Service_Leaders-January2012.pdf.

"Standards for Shlichei Tzibbur, Torah & Haftarah Chanters, and Gabbaim." Accessed March 30, 2015. http://www.sinai-sj.org/be-a-service-leader-reader/service-leader-standards.

Wolff, Josee. "The Role of Sh'liach Tzibur." Accessed March 30, 2015. http://urj.org/worship/worshipwithjoy/letuslearn/s12therole/.

Outline

Sub-Units and Lessons

This curricular unit is broken down into four sub-units, each representing broad questions about prayer. Though the curriculum title is *Engaging Jewish Spirituality*, the subtitle – *Building Prayerfulness in Teens and Young Adults* – is an indicator of its more particular focus. Here prayer, and the habits of a prayerful individual, are seen as being a key to greater engagement with Jewish spirituality. For this reason, the four questions which guide this curriculum are:

- *Why?* – Why should I pray? What reasons do my life, my experiences, and my community give me for engaging in prayer?
- *Who?* – Who (or for that matter, what) is the focus of my prayer? Does God exist for me as a literal, personal being? As a metaphor? As "the Universe" or some other great mystery?
- *How?* – What sort of prayers do I want to say? Are these fixed? Spontaneous? What language do I pray in? Do I pray without words?
- *When?* – At what times do I want to pray? How do the rhythms of time, of community, and of my own life affect my prayer practice?

As learners explore each sub-unit with its broader questions, additional questions and considerations will naturally arise. Some of these will undoubtedly be personal and unique to a particular learner, while others will perhaps be shared by most or all of the other participants. Class meetings and *chavruta* relationships will, it is hoped, provide a safe

space in which the more particular concerns can provide fodder for discussion and reflection. Shared questions will help to advance learners through the landscape of spiritual development – though it is vital to keep in mind two things: First, that different learners will find very different answers to their questions; and second, that different learners will move at different paces, and nearly all will need to return and retread a given piece of "ground" at some time or another.

In fact, the sub-units can be arranged for precisely this sort of "retreading." Some questions may arise which will form natural segues from one unit to the next – and the facilitator is advised to use these segues to the greatest possible effect. For instance:

- A thorough exploration of the question *Why pray?* will doubtless lead learners to a consideration of the question *To whom do we pray?* – that is, knowing what we believe to be the purpose of our prayer, where do we direct that prayer?
- Asking *To whom?* leads gradually to a number of considerations about the desired result of the prayer; this can bring us back to a reconsideration of *why*, but it can also propel us forward, to *how*.
- Once we have a firm grasp of what we are seeking from prayer, and who or what we are addressing with our prayers, we are ready to think about *how* to formulate our prayers, and whether our ideal prayer is a rigid traditional liturgy, a spontaneous and wordless series of movements or breaths, or something somewhere in between. Almost every learner will discover or reaffirm that they pray a "liturgy" which varies from context to context. Consideration of circumstances necessarily leads to a consideration of the seasons and events – both individual and communal – which

affect our prayer lives. In other words, when does it feel appropriate or even necessary to pray?

- The *when* question leads us to a consideration of how both regular cycles of time and significant or unanticipated moments can shape our awareness of spirituality. Occasional prayer – such as a blessing for a bar or bat mitzvah, a meditation for healing, or a breathless *wow* at seeing the sun set over the ocean – can be every bit as authentically Jewish as our fixed liturgy. Conversely, a *mitpallel* may pray prayers from a fixed liturgy – such as marking a change in seasons with *tefillat geshem* or greeting the evening with *ma'ariv aravim* – in as personal and heartfelt a manner as more spontaneous and creative prayers. Considering the different prayer options available, learners will think about what they want to pray and when they feel inspired to pray. In so doing, they may turn back to ask more *how* questions, but they will also reflect once again on the question: *Why do I pray?*

The suggested outline below offers an example of one such way to arrange units and lessons to build on these questions and the insights they evoke.

Composition of Lessons

Each lesson description provided in the following outline should provide the facilitator with a starting point for crafting core concepts to focus on in the lesson. The facilitator may also choose to concentrate on different areas with different iterations of the unit, according to the needs, interests, and abilities of learners. A few things, however,

should remain constant.

First, every lesson after the first should include at least one spiritual exercise facilitated by a *chavruta* pair. This exercise will be a chance for learners to experiment with prayer together and to try out different prayer voices in a comfortable, supportive environment. Second, each lesson will include space for *chavruta* discussion. Third, every lesson will conclude with a journal prompt – instructions for writing in the learner's online journal for the class. Finally, the overall course of study should conclude with one or more *siyyum* sessions. If possible, learners should lead (or help lead) one or more services together for the whole congregation after their formal learning is over. When the group portfolio is completed and printed (or released in some other medium), participants should have an opportunity to reunite, celebrate, and review their work together.

Sample Outline

Lesson 1: Praying for Something (Sub-unit 1: Why Pray?)

When we pray, we are often praying for something. From the Exodus story to the psalms, from the Bible to the present day, many prayers seem to be about asking for some thing or some event. But the for isn't always a desired end, the thing we're praying for; sometimes it is just the reason that motivates us to pray – the reason for our prayer. That reason might be a search for spiritual help and support, an attempt to get to know ourselves better, or a desire to connect to something greater than ourselves, like our community, our tradition, or even God.

Lesson 2: Finding Our Bearings (Sub-unit 1: Why Pray?)

Prayer can mean more than just searching for things. It is also a chance to take a "time out" to think about out how we feel, what we are capable of, and how we want to live and act in the world. Prayer can also help us to recognize the blessings in our lives along with the things we wish were different. Recognition of both good and bad – and showing gratitude for the things we appreciate – can help us grow spiritually and feel a greater sense of connection to the people and values that matter most to us.

Lesson 3: Who (or What) Is God? (Sub-unit 2: Know before Whom You Stand)

Traditional prayer talks a lot about God, but it is hard to know exactly who or even what that word means. As we pray, we have a chance to think about what our tradition says about God and where we might see something Godly in our own world. Sometimes, the word "God" can be a stumbling block. How else can we focus our prayers? Do we need to know what "God" means to us in order to pray – or even to think we are communicating with God?

Lesson 4: Looking for God (Sub-unit 2: Know before Whom You Stand)

Sometimes the natural world can fill us with a sense of God or of the beauty of creation. At other times, nature seems cruel or destructive. In times of trouble, finding God can feel very difficult. We teach that hester panim is the "hiding of the (Divine) face" that often seems to

occur when we experience suffering – the sense that God is not with us. In times of uncertainty, prayer can give voice to our feelings and help us to try to find our equilibrium again. When faced with joy and beauty, prayer can help us express and appreciate what we are experiencing.

Lesson 5: Preparing to Pray (Sub-unit 3: How Do We Pray?)

Jewish liturgy makes it clear that prayer isn't always something that we can just "jump into." Preparing to pray can mean clearing our minds and hearts to get our bearings, focusing on what is most important to us, and thinking about where we are directing our prayers. But we also need to think about what it is we want to accomplish through our prayer. Perhaps we hope that our prayers will have some influence on the world, or on God, or on ourselves. Perhaps we simply want to take time to think, or to take time to stop thinking. Perhaps we want to pray that we will be able to pray.

Lesson 6: Keva and Kavvanah (Sub-unit 3: How Do We Pray?)

Prayers may be "fixed" like the prayers of our siddur. Our intention and our focus matters, too, however. Sometimes the "script" helps us when we don't know how to pray, but it can also make us feel confined. We don't have to pray the same prayers every time, whether in Hebrew or in English. We can even pray without any words at all – through movement, silent contemplation, and in other ways. Each of these paths to prayer can be meaningful to us in

different ways.

Lesson 7: Me and My Community (Sub-unit 3: How Do We Pray?)

Our prayer lives are a very personal thing, but Jewish prayer is often shared in community. It can be challenging to find intimacy with God and our spiritual selves when we are praying as part of a larger group. But community is also a big part of our lives, both Jewishly and in general. We belong to multiple communities at the same time, and these inform how we understand ourselves. As Jews, our own hopes for ourselves are tied up in community, responsibility, and prayer.

Lesson 8: Times and Seasons (Sub-unit 4: Time for Prayer)

Regular times for prayer can help us make time for Judaism and time for ourselves in a world that is often hectic and demanding. The Jewish calendar, with its holy days and festivals, calls on us to recognize the rhythm of the year and its natural cycles. Our lives have cycles, too, and these cycles shape our spiritual awareness and our experience of prayer. Prayer is one way in which we can respond to the cycle of time and things going on in the world around us.

Lesson 9: Inspired Prayer (Sub-unit 4: Time for Prayer)

Prayer can follow a set structure or a particular liturgy, but it can also be spontaneous and

suited to the moment. Unexpected moments can bring us a sense of God or something spiritual moving in our lives. Jewish tradition offers us a basis for thinking about things like rainbows, earthquakes, good news, and bad news in a prayerful context. Learning to respond to sights, sounds, joy, and sadness with prayer can transform the way we look at ourselves and the world around us, and it can help make prayer a steady source of support and inspiration in our lives.

Sample Lesson Plans

Lesson 5: Preparing to Pray

Enduring Understandings

- Jewish prayer is not "one size fits all"
- Each *mitpallel* (pray-er) has an evolving and authentic prayer voice

Essential Questions

- What sorts of things make it hard to pray? Are they inside, outside, or both?
- When I really need to focus on something, what helps me do that?

Core Concepts

- Prayer requires intentionality and focus.
- It takes work and practice to identify the emotions and distractions that get in the way of prayer.
- Jewish liturgy recognizes that prayer isn't just something that "happens," and it leaves room for us to find our focus.

Materials:

- Box for warm-up meditation
- Pens and notepads for prayer exercise
- Copies of siddur for whole class

Learning Activities

0:00-0:05 Warm-Up: The Box (5 min)

- Invite everyone to sit in a circle.
- Begin with the following exercise:
    - *We will start with a brief, silent meditation. Take a few deep breaths. Close your eyes, if you feel comfortable doing so. I will ask you to focus on something – one thing that is weighing on you as you enter this space, troubling your mind or your soul. Take a few moments to think about that burden and the stress that comes with it. Continue to breathe, but stay there with your burden.*
- Pause for approximately 1 minute.
- Continue by picking up a shoebox covered with wrapping paper. The box has a hole cut in the top.
- *I'm going to pass around this box. You will notice that there is a hole cut in it. But this isn't a box for donations. It's not a pushke or a tzedakah box. As the box comes to you, I want you to take your burden, and to imagine it going into this box. Take your time. When the box comes around, hold on to it for as long as it takes before passing it along.*
- Once the box has gone all the way around, invite participants to take a few more deep breaths.

0:05-0:15 Prayer Exercise (Designed and led by a pair of learners in *chavruta.*)

0:15-0:35 Text Study: Preparing to Pray (20 min)

- Hand out a text sheet with the following teaching from the Mishnah printed on it:
    - "The pious ones of old used to wait an hour before praying in order that they might direct their thoughts to God." (Berakhot 5:1)
- Invite learners to read the text together in *chavruta* and consider the following questions (on the sheet for reference):
    - What might make it difficult for a person to direct their thoughts to God?
    - Are there particular activities that can help you direct your thoughts to something greater than yourself?
    - The text talks about "the pious ones of old." Do you think the person who wrote these words followed the same practice? Why or why not?
- After 15 minutes, bring learners back together to conclude the discussion together.

00:35-00:55 Reading Prayers (20 min)

- Distribute siddurim, notepads, and pens.
- Instruct learners to turn to the section for opening prayers in the weekday morning service. Provide page numbers.
- In *chavruta*, learners will pay close attention to the following prayers (in

translation):

- *Asher yatzar*
- *Elohai n'shamah*
- *Eilu d'varim*
- *"Nissim b'khol yom"* blessings

- Ask them to pause after each prayer and discuss with their partner what they see as important themes or images in the prayer. Ask them to jot down any notes about images they feel strongly drawn to, or which they find alienating. Encourage them to ask their partner for additional thoughts about their reactions.

- After 15 minutes, reassemble the group and take a few samples of themes that learners noted. Some possibilities may include:

  - *Asher yatzar* – health, creation, gratitude
  - *Elohai n'shamah* – purity, creation, thanksgiving
  - *Eilu d'varim* – duties, kindness, compassion, peace, Torah
  - "*Nissim b'khol yom*" blessings – physical blessings, spiritual blessings

00:55-1:20 Writing a Prayer (25 min)

- Ask learners to think about why the themes we just discussed are (or are not) appropriate for beginning a prayer service. *Do these themes get you in a prayerful mood? What might you change about them to make them more helpful?*

- Take a few responses to these questions. (Up to 5 minutes)

- Have learners work in *chavruta* for 10-15 minutes. Together they will craft a prayer, poem, or meditation designed to help a person "direct their thoughts to God." They will write the finished version down on paper, and later include it in their online journal entries after class. Important guidelines include:

    - Touch on a few key themes that might "open up" spiritual feelings
    - Think about the thoughts and feelings you want to "get rid of" before you pray – remember how we began with the box activity
    - Look to the siddur for inspiration
    - Be authentic
    - Be clear but concise

- After 15 minutes, ask learners to come back together to share the pieces they have created. Encourage pairs to share particular phrases they struggled with or are "still working on." Allow learners time to share suggestions with one another and make additional notes on the versions on paper.

- Remind learners that their online journals will be a work in progress and a record of their ongoing spiritual journey.

1:20-1:30 Homework (10 min)

- Ask learners to make 3 or more entries in their journal before next week's meeting,

based on the following prompt:

- *This week's entries should try to connect with a particular verse from the Torah: "Surely Adonai is in this place and I did not know it." (Gen. 28:16) We read a story in which Jacob has a surprising encounter with God, and afterward he says this sentence to himself.*

- Hand out a slip of paper with the verse on it as a reminder for learners to keep with them. Send the prompt to learners via email as well.

Lesson 7: Me and My Community

Enduring Understandings

- Jewish prayer is not "one size fits all"
- Each *mitpallel* (pray-er) has an evolving and authentic prayer voice

Essential Questions

- What does community have to do with my spiritual life?
- Which community/communities are the most important to me?

Core Concepts

- We each belong to many communities at the same time.
- These communities have a lot to do with how we see ourselves.
- Being part of a community has benefits, but it also includes responsibilities.

Materials:

- Copies of siddur for whole class, or photocopies of "Prayers of Our Community" from *Mishkan T'filah*, pp. 376-377
- Multiple colors and patterns of craft paper cut into circles of varying sizes
- Small poster board or letter-size card stock, one per *chavruta*
- Glue sticks

Learning Activities

0:00-0:10 Warm-Up: What is Community? (10 min)

- Ask group to sit facing white board/smart board
- Ask the group to consider the question: "Who is a part of your community?"
    - Take a few answers and write them down in one column
    - After several responses, ask learners to consider: "Who do you think *isn't* part of your community?"
    - If they provide any solid responses, create a sidebar labeled "OUT?" for these
- Conclude with the following question: "What kinds of spiritual or emotional support do these people give you?"
    - Make a few notes, and keep this up on the board

0:10-0:20 Prayer Exercise (Designed and led by a pair of learners in *chavruta.*)

0:20-0:30 In and Out (10 min)

- Relate the following story:
    - *A girl – we will call her Rachel – at a very unusual Jewish day school has a very unusual dilemma. Every morning for prayers, the school has several different minyanim (prayer groups). Each minyan has different customs. In the Conservative minyan, you can say all of the prayers as long as you have ten people total. In the Orthodox minyan, you can only say all of the prayers if ten or more boys show up. Rachel normally prays in the Orthodox minyan, but one*

day, only nine boys show up there. One of the people in the minyan wants to be able to say Kaddish in memory of a loved one, but without ten boys, they aren't allowed to. Rachel hears that exactly ten people total (boys and girls) have shown up to the Conservative minyan. They agree that if Rachel will come to their minyan, one of the boys will go to take her place at the Orthodox minyan. And then, everyone will be able to say the prayers they need to. But Rachel doesn't believe that she is supposed to "count," even in the Conservative minyan. If she goes, they will wind up praying prayers that she doesn't think Jews are supposed to pray without ten or more males present. What do you think Rachel does?

- Take responses and discuss.
- After a few ideas, tell the group what "Rachel" decides to do: go the Conservative *minyan* anyway. Ask for thoughts why she does this.

0:30-0:50 Circles of Community (20 min)

- Draw a series of concentric circles on the board
- Ask learners to consider which of the different kinds of people we mentioned before occupy which of the circles:
  - *You may think about school, family, synagogue, your sports team, your camp, your friends, a band you play in, a hobby you enjoy – the sky is the limit.*
  - *If you are at the center, which community is the closest to you? And the next closest after that? And then after that?*

    - Learners will discuss this question in groups (2 or 3 *chavruta* pairs per group) for about 5 minutes
- After 5 minutes, ask learners to work in *chavruta* to answer the question artistically
    - Distribute a piece of poster board or card stock as a background
    - Learners will select paper circles to use as their circles of community
    - Partners will try to agree on what the circles should represent and which pattern best fits that idea
    - They will then glue them on top of each other on the background sheet.

0:50-1:00 Discussing the Circles (10 min)

- Invite some *chavruta* pairs to show and describe their circles of community
- Label the concentric circles on the board according to common responses
- After a few pairs have contributed, ask learners to think about two questions in *chavruta*:
    - *Which of these circles do I feel the most responsibility for?*
    - *Which of these circles do I get the most from?*
- Give 2-3 minutes for discussion, and then ask learners to share their answers with the larger group
- Be sure to ask "Why?" – both when a learner's two answers are the same and when they are wildly different

1:00-1:20 Prayers of Our Community (20 min)

- Distribute siddurim or photocopied handouts of "Prayers of Our Community"

- Ask learners to read through the English prayers on these two pages and discuss in *chavruta:*
    - *These prayers occur at the end of our Torah service; why do you think that is?*
    - *Do these prayers represent all the concerns of your community? Some of them?*
    - *How might you change these prayers to make them more appropriate for your community?*
    - *Do you think it's acceptable to change these prayers, or do you think there is a good reason to stick to what's in the siddur?*
- Reconvene the group and share responses

1:20-1:30 Homework (10 min)

- Ask learners to make 3 or more entries in their journal before next week's meeting, based on the following prompt:
    - *This week's entries should relate to the different kinds of communities you belong to. Which ones make you feel spiritually energized? Which ones make you feel drained? Which ones make you feel neutral? Write at least one entry on each kind of community in your life. Share one of these with your partner before our next class meeting.*
- Send the prompt to learners via email as well

Lesson 9: Inspired Prayer

Enduring Understandings

- Jewish prayer is not "one size fits all"
- Each *mitpallel* (pray-er) has an evolving and authentic prayer voice

Essential Questions

- How can I use prayer to respond to whatever is going on right now?
- When I really need to focus on something, what helps me do that?

Core Concepts

- Jewish tradition includes blessings for many sights, smells, foods, and events.
- We might choose to respond to almost anything with a prayer.
- Spiritual feelings can rise from surprising places

Materials:

- Inflatable beach ball (medium-size) with "Prayer Ball" prompts written on different sections: Sickness, loneliness, joy, fear, anticipation, gratitude, remorse, worry, amazement, celebration, surprise, tenseness.
- Pen and paper for letter exercise
- Art paper, pencils, markers, paint, and brushes

- Speaker and recording (on smartphone) of facilitator or another individual reading the words of *Ma'ariv Aravim* and *Hashkiveinu* in English; recording needs to slow and leisurely in pace, and be in a format playable as one or two repeating tracks
- Large plastic tables (folding dining tables?) for art project work

Learning Activities

0:00-0:20 Warm-Up: Prayer Ball (20 min)

- Invite everyone to sit in a circle.
- Hold up the beach ball and introduce the exercise:
  - *This ball has several words written on it. In a few moments, I will throw it to someone, and they will try to come up with a prayer related to the word closest to their right thumb. For instance, someone might throw it to me, and I might see "tenseness" and say: "When I am tense, help me to remember that there are times of peace and times of struggle." Or I might throw it to (pick a teen or young adult who has already agreed to help with this part of the exercise), and they might see…*
    - Here you can either demonstrate in a live situation, or you can let the volunteer give a prepared answer
  - *The goal is that we want these prayers to be short and spontaneous. But when the ball comes to you, take your time, breathe, and then share your prayer with the group.*

- When the group is ready, throw the ball to the first participant; go around the circle, trying to get everyone to respond.

- In conclusion, ask a few participants to describe how it felt to be "put on the spot," and why.

0:20-0:30 Prayer Exercise (Designed and led by a pair of learners in *chavruta.*)

0:30-0:1:00 Inspiration from Prayer (30 min)

- Ask learners to close their eyes and be silent while you play audio clip of *Ma'ariv Aravim* and *Hashkiveinu* once; tell them to focus on what they see, feel, or experience from hearing the words.
- Now ask them to gather art supplies, take them to the tables, and spread out individually.
- Continue to play these prayers while learners make art or poetry based on their responses to the prayers. They do not have to work in absolute silence, but they should try not to talk too loud or distract other learners.
- After 20-25 minutes, stop the recording and invite learners to share their work, first with their *chavruta* partners, and then with the larger group.

1:00-1:20 Writing a Letter (20 min)

- Invite learners to sit with in *chavruta* to work on the following project (their last project together!). The prompt is:

- *Imagine that you are writing a letter to be sealed away and given to your great, great grandchildren. What would you hope prayer means for them? What would you tell them about your prayer life? And what would be your prayer for them?*

- Learners will spend about 10 minutes writing their letters separately, and then they will discuss them with their partners.
- Circulate around the room to observe the discussion.

1:20-1:30 Final Homework (10 min)

- Ask learners make one last journal entry responding to the following prompt:
  - *Over the course of these few months, you have gotten to know your chavruta partner fairly well. How do you think they would answer these questions ("yes," "no," or "don't know")?*
    - *Do you believe in God?*
    - *Can prayer change the world?*
    - *Do you think praying can affect the way people see you?*
    - *Do you think praying can affect the way you see yourself?*
  - *And how would you answer them for yourself?*

- Send the prompt to learners via email as well

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Donin, Hayim. *To Pray as a Jew: A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service*. New York: Basic Books, 1980.

To Pray as a Jew is an excellent introduction to the ins and outs of Jewish ritual prayer, and it can provide even a more knowledgeable Jew with a refresher on the synagogue service, as well as useful points of clarification. It is also a good resource for finding inspirational and heartfelt explanations of the "keva" prayers of Jewish tradition. Donin's writing may be difficult even for some of the young adult learners, but an excerpt here or there may make appropriate recommended reading for them after the course of study is complete. It will not be accessible to most teenagers, however.

Goodman, Roberta Louis, and Sherry H Blumberg. *Teaching about God and Spirituality.* Denver, CO: A.R.E., 2002.

This book provides a wealth of resources to any educator interested in teaching Jewish spirituality. The book is divided into three sections: Professional Development; Teacher Training; and Lessons, Curricula, Programs. The last part, offering fully developed lesson plans and ideas for activities, is perhaps the most immediately useful to the educator. Each of the Professional Development chapters, however, offers a number of activities and questions for reflection which can be adapted for use with different groups of learners. Chapters 10 ("Educating the Spirit") and 11 ("Teaching and Learning about God:

Considerations and Concerns for Adults") provide a number of useful insights about teaching spirituality to teens and adults, respectively.

Mykoff, Moshe, and S C. Mizrahi. *The Gentle Weapon: Prayers for Everyday and Not-So Everyday Moments*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999.

This book is adapted from *Likutei Maharan,* a collection of teachings by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the founder of the Breslover Chassidic sect. The book presents brief prayers attributed to Rebbe Nachman or inspired by his teachings. These prayers are separated into five broad sections: Actions, Words, Feelings, Thoughts and Will. Facilitators are strongly advised to use selections from this book as reading for participants. For some learners, these prayers will serve as an inspiration – a way to think about their own personal prayers and ways to write them. For others, they may spark discussion or even debate. For all learners, however, they can suggest that Jewish prayer does not have to be long, complicated, or ancient to be real or powerful.

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