

Helping Students Find Their Own Voice in *Tefillah*: A Conceptual Framework for Teachers¹

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If prayer is in any way a response to need or crisis, then the Modern Orthodox educational community has much to pray for – about the very act of prayer in schools. Scratch beneath the surface of many an educator and he or she will tell you that morning services are the worst part of the day.² Speak to many a student and he or she will tell you the same thing:

...I cant stand it when my teachers go out of their way to mke me *daven*. It makes me insane!!!Something about those words in the siddur just dont reach out to me. Even if i read them [the prayers] in english i still am not feeling them. I feel really bad though – i would like to understand i just cant get there Every day i do the same as every1 else – stand up sit down stand up sit down.... . I just wish it meant more to me!! Any advice?? but NO PREACHING PLEASE!!!!³

Of course, not all students feel this way, and there are thankfully

countless students for whom *davening* is a meaningful and edifying expression of their belief and spirituality. Nevertheless, one must imagine that, as adolescents, even their prayer is not the same as it was when they were younger nor the same as it will be when they are older. What happens along the way? What can educators do to help these students on their path to a more mature relationship with prayer? What can be done to free those teachers and students who find themselves locked in battle every morning and afternoon?

✂ THE SHUL AS A CLASSROOM

Before speaking about students, one must first speak about teachers. Part of the problem in the way that teachers and administrators often look at the issue of *tefillah* in schools stems from the fact that they view prayer as pray-ers rather than as educators. In all other areas of school life, professionals tend to think about issues in purely educational terms (e.g., What is the age and level of the class? What have they learned or experienced before? What is the nature of the material being taught? What skills and knowledge do I need to teach the class?). Yet when it comes to *tefillah*, we too often expect that students know what to do (especially if we just tell them to do it). We make assumptions about their emotional and spiritual backgrounds as if they learned to *daven* at some point in the past, without our ever asking ourselves or them exactly what it means “to *daven*.” If they are actually participating, we assume that they are actually doing “it” without ever checking with them what “it” is.

There are a number of reasons for these assumptions, not least of which is the fact that we do not make the time to inquire. And we often do not take the time to do so because many of us are uncomfortable with the language of spirituality or because we do not know what it means to a student to pray. Instead we simply encourage them to “*daven* with *kavanah*” as if this prescriptive alone should suffice. Another factor that makes it difficult to know which students to approach about these issues is that

tefillah is such a personal and internal “service of the heart” that it is difficult if not impossible to assess what is going on inside the child, and therefore the only basis upon which we have left to judge their commitment or seriousness or progress is their external behavior. Yet we all know that there are students who can sit in a class and seem to be attentive yet do not hear a word that is going on, and students who seem to be on another planet who will nevertheless remember every word said in class without taking any notes. Nevertheless, when it comes to *tefillah*, we judge by externals alone and therefore too often draw mistaken conclusions about a student’s internal spiritual seriousness or (lack of) progress. That is, if we think about these things at all. For too often there are teachers who are simply preoccupied with their own *tefillah* and their own spiritual well-being; after all, unlike the case with our teaching in the classroom, we are also in *shul* as equal participants who wish to fulfill our own obligations and our own needs. How much can we be expected to do?

Some benefits might be accrued, then, by looking at the synagogue not only as a *shul* where one must *daven*, but as a classroom where one must teach, not simply as *davening*, but as the first period of the teaching day. One must therefore look at all of the same things one would consider before walking into a classroom – the student, the subject material, the teacher, the context.⁴ Doing so might help us better understand our students and ourselves and, ultimately, make us better prayer educators.⁵

✂ THE LIMITATIONS IMPOSED BY THE CHILD

It is understood that there are limitations to what a school can do, and while studies are yet to be done about the relative influences in a Jewish child’s attitude toward prayer, it is clear that the family has had a significant impact even before the student walks through our doors. As in so many other areas of religious life, prayer habits are rooted in one’s religious upbringing, in the decisions and routines and faith of parents before a child ever sets foot in school.⁶ There are limits to what we as educators can do.

Moreover, Rav Adin Steinsaltz and others have suggested that the essential question about prayer education is the question of belief,⁷ a question that we as educators will not solve, if at all, solely during the forty minutes or more (or less!) when students are supposed to be engaged in *davening Shacharit*. We must therefore temper our expectations, but neither should those challenges stop us from asking ourselves if there is more that we can do.

✂ THE LIMITATIONS IMPOSED BY THE HALAKHAH

Let us assert first and foremost that daily prayer is a religious legal obligation, a *hiyyuv*. That obligation carries with it specific requirements for the timing, content, and structure of individual and communal prayer. From these rules there is no escape. We therefore owe it to our students to teach them this sense of obligation by insisting upon it. To be sure, adolescents for a variety of reasons may balk altogether or gently pull against the tide which seeks to get them to conform. Their inclinations as teenagers makes this reaction understandable. Our inclination as educators and as parents may be to give in either in part or in whole, for we do not want to have students “turned off.” But we must keep in mind that the more we do so, the more that we create alternative services that compromise the normative requirements of *tefillah*, the more we skip parts of the *davening*, or are lax in our attendance or lateness requirements, or permit boys to regularly borrow *tefillin* after *Shmoneh Esrai*, or do things that students may come to perceive as compromise or, worse, as hypocrisy, the more we potentially do a disservice to educating students toward the inescapable, often seemingly unpleasant *hiyyuv* that they must adopt. By the same token, we do not wish to be so heavy handed as to turn the mitzvah and its details into a tortuous experience. As in so many other aspects of teaching, there is as much art to achieving this balance as there is science. But lest one think that the aspect of *hiyyuv* should get the short end of the stick, “for the sake of *hinnukh*,” one should recall the finding of widespread non-Jewish research on prayer: “Most children regard worship

as uninteresting and boring, nevertheless, it is the children who have been regularly involved in it who are more likely to retain the habit of church attendance when free to abandon it.”⁸ I would suggest that the involvement must be as authentic as we can make it, for it is in that environment that we ultimately want them to find meaning.

✂ THE LIMITATIONS IMPOSED BY THE RESEARCH

Despite a decades-long inattentiveness to spiritual development in the social sciences, there has been a significant increase in recent years.⁹ If the research is in many ways in its nascent stages, that is all the more true for its subcategories such as the role of prayer in religious and spiritual development in general, and in adolescents in particular. As Spilka has pointed out:

As we continue to study the role and place of prayer in life, it is shocking to realize how much psychological speculation has been devoted to prayer over the last century, and how little empirical work has been undertaken in this area. In all likelihood well over 90% of the latter has occurred within the last two decades; an even shorter span of time has witnessed the attempts to assess the complexity of this domain.¹⁰

Yet even the research that exists presents unique challenges for anyone trying to understand *tefillah* in our own community. The vast majority of the research has been done in the Christian world, where the terms of reference and theological issues are of sufficient diversity and import as to make the application of their research inaccurate at best. Consider, for example, the Christian distinction between worship and prayer,¹¹ or the meaning of a phrase such as “living for God”¹² or even what prayer itself means, or the differing roles of clergy or religious music or personal prayer. The categorization of prayer in social science or theological studies (from a few kinds of prayer to over one hundred)¹³ may be

too broad to parallel the more *halakhic* categories of *shevach*, *bakashah*, *v'hodayah*.

Those studies that do include Jews try to base their findings on a random sampling of all Jews (a difficult feat in its own right),¹⁴ and there is little examination of the nuances or huge gaps which may divide different Jewish denominations;¹⁵ instead, Jews are looked at as a single homogeneous group. For example, consider the findings of one important study of religiosity in American youth which concluded that “Jewish teen families are, at 13 percent, the least likely to give thanks at meals, which, like some of the other measures in this chapter, *is not expected or required religious observance for Jews anyway*” [emphasis mine].¹⁶ In short, we simply do not have enough empirical information about what spiritual development means in Modern Orthodox adolescents either in qualitative or quantitative terms.

Nevertheless, there are pieces of this research that may provide us with some clues about how to proceed both in future research and in supervising the high school *minyán*.

✂ WHAT ARE OUR GOALS? KAVANAH IN TEFILLAH

When we approach teaching a new class, we must always ask ourselves: What are our goals? Prayer education should be no different. These goals will have implications for what and how we approach our subject and our students. What, then, are the goals for morning *minyán*? One might be tempted to say, “to create an atmosphere where students can *daven* with *kavanah*.” But what does this actually mean?

At first blush one might answer that we wish them to pray with the same intention described by the *Shulhan Arukh*:¹⁷

The pray-er must direct his heart to the meaning of the words which he pronounces with his lips and imagine that the Divine Presence [*Shechinah*] is before him; and he should remove all extraneous thoughts which preoccupy him until his thoughts and intention [*kavanah*] remain devoted

purely to his prayer. And he should imagine that if he were standing before a king of flesh and blood he would set out his words and say them with painstaking application so as not to stumble; all the more so [when standing] before the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed be He, who investigates every thought. This is how the pious and men of virtuous deeds would act: they would seclude themselves and apply themselves to their prayer until they reached the stage when they had divested themselves of the material, and the intellectual faculty prevailed to the extent that they came close to the level of prophecy. And if a foreign thought comes to one during prayer he should be silent until the thought has ceased. And one must reflect on matters that subdue the heart and direct it toward one's Father in Heaven and should not think of matters which involve lightheadedness.

Yet as one reads these words, one senses, upon the basis of an albeit superficial observation of the average synagogue *Shacharit* service, that this kind of *kavanah* may not be the norm on a daily basis. Indeed, this disparity is not a new phenomenon but may be wrapped up in the very nature of the tension between the demands of *tefillah* on the one hand and man's imperfect faith or the distracting demands of his life on the other. For many *halakhic* decisors themselves admit to this form of *tefillah* as an ideal which is mitigated by life in the real world.¹⁸

If this is true for adults, among them even Torah scholars, then this fact should have serious implications for our expectations of teens. The morning is not the best time to get a teen's attention, especially if he has had to commute for any length of time, and there are any number of preoccupations and distractions that can intrude upon a teenager's *kavanah*. Just as one cannot walk into a class every day expecting that students are naturally in the mood to learn, one cannot walk into *Shacharit* expecting that students are ready to *daven*. One may capitalize on those preoccupations, however, as we shall see, but first and foremost

we must agree that students may be in need of some encouragement, i.e., motivation.

What exactly, then, is the *kavanah* that we want of students? When we speak to them, when we “teach” them about *tefillah*, toward which aspects are we educating? The question of what kind of *kavanah* is critical not simply as theological argument but because from an educational perspective we need to know how to speak to students and of what to speak; in short, we need to know what to teach. To this, a number of answers are possible, depending on the pray-er and depending on the way in which one views prayer.¹⁹ That statement in itself should be of key importance to the educator – there is not one path to the palace and we would do well to recall that our students should be free to take a different turn in the road than we personally might. What we ourselves may find inspiring, a student may find suffocating, and, especially when it comes to *tefillah*, we cannot convey the message, in word or in attitude, that our way is the only way.

Needing to begin somewhere, we choose to start with a more rational approach to prayer, one that insists that intelligence, the need to *understand* rather than purely experience, is a key factor in prayer. This conception of *tefillah* is more familiar to most of our students – they live in an environment the rest of the day in which we are constantly pushing them to *understand* the Torah and the world around them; the world they live in pushes them to *understand* the theological questions inherent in *tefillah* in a way that a simple outpouring of faith would not necessarily do. We buy them Artscroll *siddurim* assuming that if they would just *understand* the words, then surely their *davening* would be different, and some schools have classes in *biurei ha-tefillah* so that students can *understand* the concepts as well as the words. To have students pray without understanding the words and gestures in which they are involved, says Rabbi Shalom Carmy, “one might as well speak of performing a piece of music that one hasn’t studied and rehearsed. One may discharge the *halakhic* obligation to pray,

but the flavor of prayer will be missing, and a feeling of spiritual malaise and dissatisfaction is one consequence.”²⁰

✂ RESEARCH ON HOW STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND THINK ABOUT PRAYER

Much of the research in this country on prayer has been done from the perspective of cognitive psychology.²¹ Heavily influenced by Piaget’s stage theory, researchers approached the study of prayer in terms of what a child understood about the nature, content, and effect of prayer. Long, Elkind and Spilka (1967), for example, used questions such as “What is prayer?” “Do dogs and cats pray?” “Can you pray for more than one thing?” in order to try to track children’s changing understanding over time beginning at age five. One of the problems with their research was that it looked at reasoning totally separately from religious belief, i.e., they applied Piagetian stages to religion just as one would to any other domain such as mathematics, without any sense of uniquely religious thought.²² That problem is exacerbated by the Kohlbergians, who, while they admitted to the uniqueness of religious thought, nevertheless maintained that the stages were universal, without giving sufficient attention to what may be cultural specific, i.e., the unique contents of that religious thought.²³

For our purposes, one of the interesting areas of research in these studies regards the specific category of petitionary prayer. Some exploration of this subject will help provide us with at least one key to understanding how our students understand prayer as well as suggest some of the directions for further research in *tefillah* education. A number of the studies indicate that as children grow older they have a decreasing sense of the direct efficacy of prayer; in other words, children realize that prayers are not answered immediately, directly, and concretely.²⁴ One could well imagine that this awareness should lead to some doubt about prayer and some refusal to continue to either pray or pray using the same contents as one did when younger. Yet is this necessarily so?

One of the few pieces of research that deals with students remotely similar to our own is Rena Rosenberg's study of attitudes to prayer by religious (*mamlachti dati*) and nonreligious students in Israel.²⁵ Following in the footsteps of her cognitive psychology predecessors, Rosenberg used a complex system of categorization in order to determine how children and adolescents think about the efficacy of prayer. In a study of 180 children between first and tenth grades, students were first asked, "What is prayer?" and "Why do we pray?" and then shown a picture of a boy or girl praying at the Kotel, which was then followed by an interview which focused on whether prayers are answered and under what circumstances. Beliefs about the efficacy of prayer were measured on the basis of five different content areas, dealing with how the person prays, who the person is in terms of his/her characteristics or good deeds, what are the moral or functional aspects of the content of the prayer in question, the conception by the child of God's will and judgment, and finally, prayer as a reflexive subjective act, reflecting back to the praying person, judging him or herself.

The results point to fascinating differences across the stages of development, moving from the more concrete to the more abstract. Older students may relate to some of the same concepts and content areas as younger children, but they interpret them very differently, using completely different categories than do younger children. Regarding the content of prayer, for example, younger students may speak about good and bad requests whereas older religious students will speak of altruistic prayers. With regard to the person praying, a younger child will have a generalized concept of the efficacy of the prayer of a pious person versus a wicked person, whereas the older student will say that it is dependent upon the faith of the praying person. These findings indicate the need for us to recall that how a student views the efficacy of his or her own prayer, that students may be at different stages of development, from the more concrete to the more abstract, and that we must tailor our messages accordingly, or else we will be talking at them in a language they do not understand. In short, a

ninth grader may understand the notion of *kavanah* very differently than does a twelfth grader.

More significantly, since previous findings were that as children grow older there is a decreasing sense of the direct efficacy of prayer, it would make sense to suggest that they will also come to see many of these concepts as meaninglessness; that is, since prayer is not answered anyway, then the who, what, and how of prayer become of little or no importance. This attitude is exactly what Rosenberg discovered among the nonreligious students. But for the religious students, these concepts and categories were not rejected or abandoned; for example, they might still believe that the character of the pray-er was influential in the efficacy of prayer. Why should this be so? Why should students who believe less still continue to pray? There can be at least two explanations, each with its own practical implications.

One reason may be that students who have doubts nevertheless continue to pray. This is an important point for religious educators to explore with students who are first moving into this phase, namely, that one may continue to doubt and pray at the same time. This notion may fly in the face of those adolescents who may see this as hypocritical, but it is precisely because one can indeed live with both tendencies that it is important to address, or at least articulate aloud, before students come to their own conclusions.

Yet another explanation could be that adolescents do not doubt or reject old concepts but rather revise them and integrate them into their changing religious worldview. In other words, religious students' understanding of prayer develops, evolves, and matures over time. There are reformulations and reinterpretations of familiar concepts. The question is whether this happens automatically or whether we as educators can help shape that development, whether students do it all internally or whether we help them give it voice. I would contend that it is not something that is to be taken for granted and that we have an obligation to nurture and assist that growth just as we do in other areas of education.

Most significant, however, is the finding that students who were the oldest in the study, ninth and tenth graders, understood prayer in a subjective-reflexive way. Rather than view prayer solely as a dialogue with God in which one reached out in petition, these students, unlike any of the younger ones, described prayer “as important in itself and as having a great effect on the praying person him/herself for a variety of reasons depending on the adolescents’ beliefs. Obviously, this view is based on the ability of the adolescent to see his/her thoughts, feelings and personality as objects of his/her thinking.”

There are two important implications of this finding that require analysis:

(1) Adolescents often feel that the efficacy of prayer is related to its impact on themselves. A subsequent similar study of Catholic students likewise found a shift in focus from seventh graders who had a belief in God “out there” to a more internal focus expressed by ninth graders and especially later by undergraduates described as the inner world of feelings.²⁶ I believe these findings can shed light on *what* we can focus on when we speak to students about prayer.

(2) Adolescents are able to bring themselves and their own thoughts, feelings, and personality to the text of the *siddur*. They have the ability to “see” or “find” themselves in the text as opposed to its being words that someone else has written about God. This observation has implications for *how* we might teach.

✂ TEACHING KAVANA – WHAT TO FOCUS ON?

The Hebrew meaning of the word *l’hitpallel* may be understood as a way to present oneself for judgment before God or, as popularized by Rav Hirsch, it may be understood to mean that the goal of prayer is to judge oneself. This latter, more rational approach to prayer, which finds significant meaning not in the impact that prayer has on God but in the impact it has on the pray-er, has a long tradition, but in the American Modern Orthodox world it is closely associated with the writings of Rav Soloveitchik.

What man fails to comprehend is not the world around him, but the world within him, particularly his destiny, and the needs of which he is supposed to have a clear awareness.

Many would say that to accuse modern man of being unaware of his needs is absurd. The reverse, they would maintain, is true. Modern man is aware of many needs; in fact, there are too many needs which claim his attention. An entire technology is bent upon generating more and more needs in order to give man the opportunity to derive pleasure through the gratification of artificially fabricated needs.

Though this assertion is true, it does not contradict my previous statement that contemporary man is unaware of his needs. Man is surely aware of many needs, but the needs he is aware of are not always his own. At the very root of this failure to recognize one's truly worthwhile needs lies man's ability to misunderstand and misidentify himself, i.e., to lose himself. Quite often man loses himself by identifying himself with the wrong image. Because of this misidentification, man adopts the wrong table of needs which he feels he must gratify.

Man responds quickly to the pressure of certain needs, not knowing *whose* needs he is out to gratify. At this juncture, sin is born. What is the cause of sin, if not the diabolical habit of man to be mistaken about his own self? Let me add that man fails to recognize himself because he is man. As man, he was cursed by the Almighty, condemned to misuse his freedom and to lose his own self. In other words, adoption of a wrong table of needs is a part of the human tragic destiny.

The confusion about one's true needs is typical of man as man, without distinction of life experience. Does the young man understand his basic needs? If he did, we would have no problem of crime, drugs and permissiveness in general. Is the middle-aged male oriented toward his real needs; does he know what is relevant and what is irrelevant to him? If he did, there would be fewer deaths from heart disease.²⁷

I have often heard the lament that it is difficult to make prayer meaningful for a generation of relatively affluent students who are oblivious to the notion of need or whose notion of need is so different from that of the paradigmatic Jew of yore whose *davening* consisted of the one heartfelt plea: “*Ribbono shel Olam* – please just send *parnasah!*” That statement speaks to the sense of dependency that the pray-er has upon God for his sustenance and his very existence; it goes to the heart of petitionary prayer. Yet the Rav’s shifting of the focus of prayer from the attempt “not to inform Him of our troubles, as it were, but to formulate them in His presence”²⁸ allows us to circumvent this obstacle. For every man and woman has “basic needs,” and the research shows us that adolescents not only have them as well, and not only may be even more driven than adults to wrestle with and resolve them, but, given their newfound ability “to see his/her thoughts, feelings and personality as objects of his/her thinking,” they are able if not eager to now use the prayer experience as a vehicle for self-examination about those needs. Adolescents tend to be self-centered and in search of self in any event; what better framework to do so than in prayer?

What are the ‘needs,’ then, to which we should be appealing when we speak to our students? That may well depend on how an academic may view adolescents in developmental terms or even on how the average teacher hears the needs expressed by adolescents themselves, but there is no lack of needs: the need to become closer to God, to overcome one’s loneliness, to discover what is really important in the world, to create new meaning of the familiar, to discover autonomy and its limits, to transcend the self, to understand the self, to find one’s uniqueness, to explore one’s relationship to other people, Jews and non-Jews, to name but a few.²⁹

In a similar vein, the advocates of social and emotional learning suggest that there are a host of key questions that emerge during the period of adolescence: How does my life have meaning and purpose? What gifts do I have that the world wants and

needs? To what or whom do I feel most deeply connected? How can I rise above my fears and doubts? How do I deal with the suffering of my family, my friends, others in the world, myself? What or whom is it that awakens or touches the spirit within me? As Maurice Elias and Jeffrey Kress point out, “Each of these “big ideas” – purpose, gifts, connection, fears, suffering, and personal spirit – takes on added meaning when a Jewish context is added to secular developmental considerations.”³⁰

These questions point to the fact that petitionary prayer is not the only kind of prayer that is suited to addressing adolescent needs. Rachael Kessler suggests that one of the passageways to nurture the soul of a child is through moments of joy, which is defined as “the desire of the human spirit to experience and express the delight of existence.” Such joy can consist of experiences of gratitude and celebration, awe, wonder, and reverence for life. Similarly, adolescents already have an urge for transcendence even beyond the narrow religious definition.³¹ How much more could these needs be met not only through *bakashot* but through prayers of *shevach* and *hodayah* as well. Let them draw upon their life experiences and help them find words within the text with which to associate those memories and feelings.

In a similar vein, adolescents’ need for meaning and purpose in life can be enhanced by the notion of service to others. Rav Soloveitchik notes that, like prophecy, one of the hallmarks of prayer is its emphasis on ethico-moral content.

The *Halakhah* has never looked upon prayer as a separate magical gesture in which man may engage without integrating it into the total pattern of his life...Prayer is always the harbinger of moral reformation. This is the reason why prayer per se does not occupy as prominent a place in the *Halakhic* community as it does in other faith communities and why prayer is not the great religious activity claiming, if not exclusiveness, at least centrality. Prayer must always be related to a prayerful life which is consecrated to the realization of

the divine imperative and, as such, it is not separate entity but the sublime prologue to *Halakhic* action.³²

If service or moral action can be seen as fulfilling the needs of the adolescent for meaning in one's life, then the related values and concepts found in *tefillah* can be used to direct a student toward greater spirituality.³³

In sum, all of these needs may be satisfied in prayer, and we can legitimately tell students implicitly and explicitly that their search for self can be turned into Divine service. Finally, all of these needs may be found in the *siddur* itself – it is our job as teachers to help students find and relate to them there.

✎ TEACHING KAVANA – HOW?

One of the biggest mistakes made by educators who speak about *tefillah* is the assumption that students share the teacher's assumptions. What is meaningful, moving, and spiritually uplifting to the teacher may well be beyond the frame of reference or life experience of the student. Moreover, we are adults and have had a lifetime (or at least a few years) more of feelings, emotions, and experiences than our students, all of which we bring to bear when we recite the words of the *siddur* or are conscious of our standing in the presence of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. Our students do not come with the same experiences or the same maturity, and it would be misguided to automatically try to make their associations the same as our own. The goal, especially in prayer education, must be to enable the student to tap into his or her own frame of reference and own life experience. This approach has been written about and illustrated by Chaim Zvi Enoch,³⁴ who maintained that the role of the teacher is to help the student find the "I" in his prayers, to help the student become a creative force in his or her own prayer. More than in any other area where we might leave room for the student's own voice to emerge, here helping the student find her own voice is almost everything.³⁵ How does one help the student do this? Enoch suggests that we need to help students

create their own associations with the words of the text. If, indeed, the background of prayer consists of the meanings and personal associations that we bring to the words, then we must help students make those connections. For as adults we are often able to do so, because we have a bank of life experiences to draw from and because we understand the words of the text sufficiently well that we are able to use them effectively as triggers for *kavanah*. But students, especially younger students and especially those newly emerging from a more concrete understanding of the words and of life, may need training and direction in making those connections. They need help being shown how to associate and how to make meaning, but the associations and the meaning must always be their own.³⁶ Any study of prayer, according to Enoch, should ideally add to the precision and variety of the student's associations. An underlying goal of teaching prayers, then, is to show students that they are "associatively poor" and that the text can help enrich them.³⁷

How one teaches these associations, or rather which associations one tries to model³⁸ or focus upon, will depend on the "needs" that one perceives are relevant to the particular group, all the while taking into account their cognitive, emotional, and religious development. For some students, the blessings of *birkhot ha-shachar* may be a religious obligation born of the requirement to be conscious of God in all of one's waking actions, while for another it may raise issues of gender identity. For one student the first blessing may conjure up the sound of a rooster, for another it may be the call of his own heart to a sense of wonder, or a recalling of spiritual moments from a summer experience.³⁹ For one student, *pokeach ivrim* could be a declaration of God's power; for another it could be a challenge to open one's eyes to see one's own failings or see something familiar in a different light; and for yet another it could be a moral challenge to imitate God's ways by volunteering for a *chesed* opportunity for the blind. The first request of *Shmoneh Esrai* regarding intelligence could include a plea to pass a test that day, or it could be a recognition of the uniqueness

of man over the animals, or the universality of man; it could reflect a commitment to understand schoolwork rather than just learn and memorize it, or the commitment to use one's understanding for the purpose for which it was intended – as a prerequisite for *teshuvah* (the next blessing) and other moral action.

Each of these prayers presents a number of possibilities of meaning, but it is up to the individual student to determine whether and how they are meaningful for him or her. Each possibility represents a choice of association. Students must be taught the possibilities that are afforded by the Hebrew language and *halakha* and Jewish thought, as well as taught to explore possibilities that are of their own creation. Then, each student must be encouraged to find a way to relate to these and then be given the freedom to choose the possibilities that are the most meaningful and that they can use the next time as the background to their own *kavana*.

✂ RECOGNIZING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE *TEFILLAH* “CLASSROOM”

As in the classrooms we lead the rest of the day, we must always be sensitive not only to the needs of the group but to the needs of the individual learner as well. Elsewhere I have suggested that since the research shows that girls' conceptions of God as confidante may be very different from boys' conceptions of Him as representing authority and power, this difference may explain why it might be easier for girls to *daven* than for boys and it may thus behoove us as prayer educators to speak to each of them differently.⁴⁰ Others have suggested that girls may be better *daveners* than boys because the obligatory nature of prayer makes prayer much more of a rote chore for many boys than the seemingly more flexible obligation of girls. If that is true, then perhaps coeducational schools are doing girls a disservice by compelling them to *daven* regularly in the same *minyanim* with boys.⁴¹

But we must also admit to the fact that we have many students in our *minyan* who may have trouble focusing: the ADHD

student, for whom sitting through an entire service may be a tortuous rather than uplifting affair; the LD student for whom reading large amounts of text at breakneck speed may be frustrating and offputting; the angry student or the disconnected one or the student who is simply having a bad day or week. They all, it is hoped, get individualized attention and understanding and accommodations in our classrooms every day; so too should they in our *minyán* “classroom.”

We have focused primarily on the role of the text in *tefillah* education because it is the text that students often see as a barrier rather than an entranceway to heartfelt prayer.⁴² But this emphasis here should not preclude the importance of paying close attention to the “classroom” environment⁴³ or the use of art⁴⁴ and music and song⁴⁵ and silence⁴⁶ in making the “*tefillah* class” that day more meaningful.

Nor should it be misconstrued that what is being advocated for here is a purely intellectual way of approaching the text. In the end, prayer is a matter of the heart and, as Pascal said, “the heart has reasons of which reason has no knowledge.” At times, as teachers of text, we spend too much time trying to explicate the text when we speak about the *siddur*. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein has observed, it is not that we have over-intellectualized faith; it is, rather, if such a term exists, that we have under-emotionalized it. We must never forget the experiential component.

One of the frustrations of day school education is that there are not always a lot of opportunities to talk about God in a natural and organic way. And aside from informal education, there are not a lot of opportunities to experience a relationship with God. Yet every morning in countless schools, a major opportunity presents itself. Rather than bemoan its difficulties or be overcome by its challenges, rather than trying to get through it as quickly as we can so that we may move on to our classrooms to teach Torah, rather than hiding our noses in our own *siddurim* trying to focus all of our attention on our own *kavanah*, we should instead be embracing this first period of the day as an opportunity to teach.

For this period of the day represents not only one of our biggest challenges as teachers, but one of our most important obligations as well.

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✎ NOTES

1. In honor of Rabbi Haskel Lookstein whose passion for *tefillah* has always been inspirational and, in gratitude, for providing me with the opportunity to grow as an educator.
2. See Moshe Drellich's report that at a *tefillah* workshop he ran for teachers, "Almost all of the twenty participants in the workshop identified *tefillah* as their least favorite part of the school day. One teacher commented that supervising *davening* was as enjoyable as covering lunch duty!" Moshe Drellich, "Tefillah Motivation Through Relationship Building and Role Modeling: One Rabbi's Approach." *Jewish Educational Leadership* 5:2 (Winter 2007), 40–43.
3. From a website for Jewish teens: <http://www.thelockers.net/forum/archive/index.php/index.php?t-74.html> Accessed August 2007.
4. These categories come from the commonplaces of Schwab's framework for curriculum formulation. Joseph J. Schwab, "The Practical 4: Something for Curriculum Professors to Do," *Curriculum Inquiry* 1983, 13 (3): 239 – 265.
5. One of the unfortunate by-products of focusing more on the "teaching" and "leading" of *tefillah* services is that the personal prayers of the teacher or pulpit rabbi can be seriously affected. Most professionals will admit to this negative and erosive effect that their role can sometimes have on their own spirituality. This is a serious issue to which administrators and congregants need to pay attention.
6. I hope to produce a separate paper on this topic. For now, see as one example, C. Boyzatis, D. Dollahite, and L. Marks, "The Family as a Context for Religious and Spiritual Development<" in E. Roehlkepartain, P. King, L. Wagener, and P. Benson, *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*. (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage, 2006), pp. 297–309.
7. Adin Steinsaltz, המכון כהן גבריאיל ב"ב, עמ' 203–209. התפילה היהודית: המשך והידרוש בשדה חמד, Rav Steinsaltz maintains that the core of *kavanah* in *tefillah* is the realization that one is actually in dialogue with God. The crisis in prayer, he writes, is an obvious part of the crisis of faith. Preoccupation with explaining words or concepts is thus a red herring in any discussion of educating toward *tefillah*.
8. See Kenneth Hyde, *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence: A Comprehensive Review of the Research* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1990), pp. 11–12.
9. For an overview of the field, see, for example, Roehlkepartain et. al., "Spiritual development in childhood and adolescence: Moving to the scientific mainstream," *Handbook of Spiritual Development*, pp. 1–15. For a brief statistical summary of the number of articles printed on various related subjects in mainstream social science literature, see P.L. Benson, E.C. Roehlkepartain, and S.P. Rude, "Spiritual development in childhood and adolescence: Toward a field of inquiry." *Applied Developmental Science* 7 (2003), 204–212.
10. Bernard Spilka, "Religious Practice, Ritual, and Prayer," in Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (New York: Guilford, 2005), p. 372.
11. *Ibid.*
12. We can bring any number of examples from different works but some from the same recent far-reaching study may suffice: Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005) is a study of close to 3,500 American teens of different faiths. In one place the author makes the statement that "Jewish teens...are not big on making personal commitments to live for God, but are ahead of the Catholics on experiences of powerful worship and ahead of mainline Protestants on having witnessed a miracle." The footnote says, "We recognize that there is no generic way of asking this question that works equally well across all religious traditions; some, for instance, use the phrase "born again," others clearly do not. "Personally committed to live life for God" is the most general phrasing we could devise" (p. 44 and n. 7 at p. 314).
13. Spilka (2005) loc cit.

14. See Smith's difficulties in the National Survey of Youth and Religion, in *Soul Searching*, pp. 298–299.
15. One finds problematic statements such as: “Jewish and nonreligious teens are the least likely to engage in the regular practice of personal prayer.” *Ibid.*, p. 47. “[T]he majority of all service-attending teens say that their congregation usually makes them think about important things, although Jewish teens appear more split on this question than the other teens” (p. 61).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
17. *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim*, 98:1
18. *Eruvin* 64b-65a cites R. Elazar ben Azarya's lament about how difficult he thought it was for the Jewish people to *daven* in the wake of the tragedy of the destruction of the Temple: “I could exempt the entire world from the duty [to pray with *kavanah*] from the day that the holy Temple was destroyed until now, as the verse says, “Therefore listen to this, unhappy one, who are drunk but not with wine (*Isaiah* 51:21).” In other words, there is a recognition that distractions can get in the way of true prayer.
 The Gemara goes on to cite the practice of some Rabbinic authorities who did not *daven* because they could not focus because of internal or external distractions (e.g., the inability to think clearly, the difficulty of a long journey, being surrounded by bad smells). To this, the Tur cites the Maharam MiRotenburg:
 כתב הר"ם מרוטנבורק אין אנו נוהרין עתה בכל זה שאין אנו מכוונים כל כך בתפילה – טור אורח חיים סימן צח
 Similarly, see *Yerushalmi Brakhot* 2:4 (and Tosafot Rosh Hashana 16b s.v. *iyyun tefillah*).
 “Rabbi Hiya said: ‘I never concentrated during prayer in all my days. Once I wanted to concentrate, but I thought about who will meet the king first: the Arkafta [a Persian high official] or the Exilarch?’
 Shmuel said, ‘I count clouds [during prayer].’
 R. Bun bar Hiyah said, ‘I count the layers of stones in the wall [while I pray].’
 R. Matnaya said, ‘I am grateful to my head, because it bows by itself when I reach *Modim*.’”
19. See Seth Kadish, *Kavvana* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1997), esp. chapter 7.
20. Shalom Carmy, “Without intelligence, whence prayer?” *Tradition* 37:1 (Spring 2003), p. 10. This is not to say that all of prayer consists of thinking about the words to the exclusion of feeling one is in the presence of God. Rather, as Carmy points out, there is a balancing act at play: “The act of prayer must occupy the foreground of consciousness while the interpretation of prayer, in the background, provides the meaning” (p. 11).
21. Social psychology too has played a major role. It has been suggested that unlike in America, in Britain most of the research on religion has come from the perspective of the field of education.
22. Jacqueline D. Wooley and Katrina E. Phelps (“The Development of Children's Beliefs about Prayer,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 1:2 [2001], pp. 139-166) tried to take this work further by including pre-school children as well as including added measures to encourage spontaneous inference and reasoning. Their findings indicated among other things that children have an even earlier awareness of God than was originally thought and that they have some religious concept that is independent of other thinking.
23. In Rosenberg's study cited below, for example, nonreligious Israeli students were much closer to their Western counterparts in their conceptions of God and prayer than they were to the religious Israeli students.
24. A pioneering study in this area was done in the 1960s by Robert Thouless and Laurence Brown. “Petitionary prayer: Belief in its appropriateness and causal efficacy among adolescent girls,” in A. Godin, ed., *From Religious Experience to Religious Attitude* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1965). See similarly, L.B. Brown, “Egocentric thought in petitionary prayer: A cross-cultural study,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 68 (1966), pp. 197–210.
25. Rina Rosenberg. “The Development of the Concept of Prayer in Jewish-Israeli Children and

- Adolescents." *Studies in Jewish Education*. Vol. 5. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1990), pp. 91–129.
26. George Scarlett and Lucy Perriello, "The Development of Prayer in Adolescence," *New Directions for Child Development* 52 (Summer 1991), pp. 63–76.
 27. Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," p. 62, in *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 55–72.
 28. Shalom Carmy, "Destiny, Freedom, and the Logic of Petition," *Tradition* 24:2, 1989.
 29. The notion of needs fits in with the rather egocentric world of the adolescent. A sharper and perhaps more negative view of the role of religion in the lives of contemporary adolescents in America is reflected in the conclusion of the National Study of Youth and Religion, mentioned earlier, which describes the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teens as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." In describing the therapeutic aspects, the authors suggest that: It provides therapeutic benefits. "This is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etcetera. Rather, what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people." *Soul Searching*, pp. 164–165.
 30. Maurice J. Elias and Jeffrey S. Kress, *The Emergence of Spirituality in Adolescence*, The United Synagogue Review, Fall 1999. Accessed at http://www.uscj.org/The_Emergence_of_Spi5453.html. August 2007.
Fowler puts most teens in his stage 3, wherein "the adolescent's hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as a guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith" (153ff).
 31. Rachael Kessler, *The Soul of Education* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2000), esp. chapters 5 and 7.
 32. Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7:1 (Winter 1964–1965), pp. 41–43.
 33. It is said that the nineteenth-century abolitionist Fredrick Douglass, who was raised as a slave, once said that as a child he prayed to God that he should be freed. Later on, he said, "Prayer got down in my feet, and I ran away."
See Norman Meskin, "Prayer as an Act of *Chesed*," *Jewish Education News*, Spring 5766, who suggests that prayer can be "marketed" as an act of "concern for the other" – an "act of philanthropy." See also Saul Wachs, *Teenagers, Spirituality and Prayer in the Jewish Community Secondary Day School* (Philadelphia: Akiba Hebrew Academy, 1999).
 34. Chaim Zvi Enoch (1904–1977) was one of the founders of the religious Zionist education movement in Israel. For a full biography, see the entry at <http://he.wikipedia.org/>. I am grateful to Rabbi David Eliach, who first introduced me to Enoch's work more than thirty years ago.
 35. Recall the gemara, which speaks to the need for individual creativity.
רבי אליעזר אומר העושה תפלתו קבע אין תפלתו תחוננים...ורב יוסף דאמרי תרויהו – ברכות דף כח/ב
כל שאינו יכול לחדש בה דבר
 36. Brown suggests that our understanding of prayer might be enhanced by using the computer language of source code and that prayer should be thought of as "an important 'source program' to express and help us understand what we know." L.B. Brown, *The human side of prayer: The psychology of praying* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1994), p. 203.
 37. ח.צ. אנוך, "על הוראת עיון תפלה: קוים לדידאקטיקה של המקצוע עם הצעת דוגמה לביצוע." מעינות: מאסף 255–293 ח' תשכ"ח, ה' ירושלים: ההסתדרות הציננית העולמית, תשכ"ח, 255–293.
 38. This alludes to an entirely different study that is called for, namely, the role of the teacher in teaching prayer.
 39. Job 38:36, where the word שכוי may be understood as one's mind.

40. Jay Goldmintz, "Spiritual Development in Adolescence: A Work in Progress," *Tradition* 37:4 (Winter 2003).
41. Shraga Fisherman, *Almah Avdah*. Elkana: Orot, 5761, pp. 26–30.
42. "The text can thus stimulate personal reflection and the examination of issues of moral or spiritual significance. Part of the task of the school is to teach pupils that words are to be taken seriously, which means that *words have consequences*. An important question to be asked when one is studying prayer is: "At this moment in my life, if I took the words of this prayer seriously, what difference might it make?" Saul Wachs, *Teenagers, Spirituality and Prayer*, p. 46.
43. Yoel Finkelman, ed., *Educating Toward Tefillah* (Jerusalem: ATID, 2001), esp. pp. 12–13.
44. Jay Goldmintz, "The Art of Tefillah," *Jewish Educational Leadership*, 5:2 (Winter 2007), 26–30.
45. Alan Brill suggests that in using song, whether in a *minyan* or not, "The goal is to reach feelings of warmth, connection, and emotion that transcend the rational everyday world. . . . God is portrayed as a warm caring parent waiting for us to return, or who looks down with love on singing. One should take care not to use this approach as entertainment or solely as *ruach*; Hasidic music should not merely be another form of high school pep rally. The *feeling* approach works when we remember that the goal of the feelings is to reach the transcendent, and that God wants one to sing or show love as a path to monism." Alan Brill, "Spiritualities in the Classroom," *Jewish Educational Leadership* 5:2 (Winter 2007), 10–13.
- For an educational perspective see Shira Weiss, "Letting God In: The Spiritual Development of Modern Orthodox High School Girls." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Azrieli Graduate School, 2006.

While this is not the place to explore the use of song in *tefillah*, it may be worthwhile to share with students the kinds of things that have been said over time about this issue. See, for example:

ספר חסידים (מרגליות) סימן קנח

חקור לך אחר ניגונים וכשתתפלל אמור אותן באותו ניגון שנעים ומתוק בעיניך באותו ניגון אמור תפלתך ותתפלל תפלתך בכוונה וימשוך לבך אחר מוצא פוך. לדבר בקשה ושאלה ניגון שמכין את הלב. לדברי שבח ניגון המשמח את הלב למען ימלא פוך אהבה ושמחה למי שרואה לבכך ותברכהו בחיבה רחבה וגילה כל אלה הדברים המכינים את הלב.

46. Moshe Drelich, "An experiment in tefillah," *Lookjed*, Nov. 30, 2005.