



Institute for Jewish Spirituality

Yom Iyyun: Prayer as Practice

June 1, 2015 • Congregation Beth El • Berkeley, CA

What did you notice?

I noticed my own deep need for spiritual practice, nourishment and sense of growth in a spiritual practice. I noticed the possibility of *yirah* opening or giving way to *avodah*.

I closed my eyes and noticed how much I rely on sight during prayer – and how constraining yet comfortable that can be. I was liberated by using just ears and my voice to follow along and harmonize with niggunim I didn't know. I found it challenging to recite the liturgy remember the order and words of prayers. But I was so relaxed it didn't cross my mind until now that perhaps some of the conventional "substance" of *tfila* wasn't there. But does that always matte? I don't know.

1. As a practitioner I felt well held and the simplicity of the melodies and the chosen liturgy allowed me to just dial down a few notches. I quieted and that was both deeply needed and pleasant.
2. But it did not open my heart as was the instructed goal – perhaps this is a by-product of being a "professional." Now after years of being a leader *davvenen* is more of an emptying out rather than opening – not in a negative way, just noticing that the experience is more about finding a flattening and stillness.

There was no in-between place; it was one piece and not anything and was not connected to everything else.

Hard to keep my focus and *Kavanah* but nice to have set the *kavanah* to keep returning to.



I wept when I identified my *kavanah*. I felt supported by the voices and loving presence of the people to my right and left, my immediate neighbors. I felt safe in the melodies, even though they were unfamiliar to me, and even safe to let my voice go into harmonies when I needed that expression of uplift. I had moments of feeling closer and more open to God.

Great peace. Grateful to be here. Reb Shir's presence filling one mind and heart. Feeling of the lovely music – my own voice – all the voices – I'm singing.

Joy, longing. The desire to remain in that feeling, dwell in it, stop time.

The steady quieting of my heart during *davening*.

All chant together. Each gets to wonder what the others experience. Only faith argues that we're in the same place.

The music/singing immediately opened my heart. I was aware of fears and tears and the singing opened me to images and memories of lost ones and eventually to prayerful connection to God during the Amidah.

Lots of tears I didn't realize were in there. Still feel uncomfortable when I don't "know it." I'm carrying around too much weight – I need to let it go somehow. Prayer together is so very moving.

Sadness, fear, love, gratitude.



Institute for Jewish Spirituality

Silence – felt like something powerful was happening. Amidah – connection to love, and expression of God? I think so. Freedom – felt free to get up and move. Willing participants – when folks agree to get “into it” the group takes off.

Joy in the voices harmonizing, full, together. Remembering Richard. How tempting it was to stray (thoughts) and how practiced. Prayer practice is something to strengthen in order to stay with intention and live it as me.

How evocative of Z the *davenen* was. How much of a legacy Z left – created a whole new genre. How much I felt and how closely I melded to the embrace of community. Total state change – everything fell away.

I am part of a quiet joyful community.

His inner peace and intention. His “direction” came from within (no books, prayer or instruction). It led me to a calmer, deeper place. Though I didn’t recognize 1 tune, it was so easy to take part, I felt like part of a group, though I didn’t know people.

It was nice to have a minimum of words for the prayers. Transitions...were gentle and defined. The sound of this community praying was very moving and comforting and uplifting.

Shalom. Harmony. Mood. Purposefulness, kavanah. My “inside” and “outside” oneness. Space for meditation and contemplation. Call & response melodies contributed to all of the above, and was a clear, spiritual energy.



Once I engage - it takes a while – I first feel myself, then I feel other. Shalom shalom all around. Same for leader. Quiet – holding space and time. Non-verbal intentional directions allowing freedom for personal interpretation and feeling. Blending voices and emotions.

I needed to move. I felt limited by the chair and also a bit self-conscious while *davening* but I felt prayerful in my body. Alive, connected, receptive, open. I intentionalized the *kavanah* of the prayer (crossing the sea) by dancing it.

Permeability of sound and space – determined gentleness and sirens, screams of children, coughing, shifting. Rustling towards a joyous holding of time, people, space.

Harmony of beautiful voices, always moving. I reflected on different wishes/thoughts during Amidah. Familiarity with prayers, and order helped me follow, the rest felt unfamiliar.

I missed the beginning of the morning due to a work commitment; I noticed my own joy at coming into the sanctuary at about 10:30 and joining a group that was in the midst of prayer. Delicious!

I noticed an openness in myself and in others around me. I was able to express a *kavanah* that I didn't know that I was experiencing. I am so pleased to be here today.

When we sang *Kol Haneshama* it was like sailing on the bay when the wind picks up and the sails filled. A kind of loss of control in a deep, powerful way. The need to pray, to sing, to be in community. Physicality: how the tongue moved inside the mouth during *shema*; what it feels like to really *stand* with the *Amidah*.



Institute for Jewish Spirituality

Call response prayer o opening of heart, community connection, feelings of awe, the happiness of freedom. Feelings of love and calmness. Unity of all. Intention of healing for all. Realization that I am enough that what I have achieved is enough, time to celebrate and let go. This is a joyous and sacred time.

Gentleness of experience; invitation to feel the journey; organic flow; open heart; sense of welcome.

Peace – inner peace, harmony. Stillness of spirit. Movement of spirit. Transition. Awareness of self and community. Intention/*kavanah*. Slowed breathing and heart rate.

At first I felt a little reluctant to let go – it felt unknown and scary – didn't know what to expect. Then I let it in and opened up and it was glorious.

Seeing the sound of the niggunim. Settling into the space – being surrounded by voices vibrating. Flowing along - not in my head – in my body and breath. Safe; tears; smiles; gratitude for those that brought be here, being wrapped in love and intention.

Beautiful singing; beautiful harmonies; impatience with a song going on too long; wanted the text of the Amidah; wanted to hear more harmonies; worried about not finding a partner to share – worried about being left out; irritation at someone blocking my view; distraction of emails that might have come in, and hard to put that aside.

I go to “left out” very quickly. *Ahavah rabah* vibrating. Hard for me when I do not have a role. The pain of missing my children. How do I see my own importance truthfully and feel the love in it?



Ways that hold tight and let fly as songs and chanting take away to familiar prayers and unknown melodies.

Beautiful voices; *kavanah* as a community; release; openness; discernment; centering; ending *Amidah* with shalom melody; awareness /self consciousness of my voice while the person next to me was recording; afraid to sing too loud or sing how I wanted to.

When my body relaxed my mind followed. There is space in this body. Empty space, maybe God will fill it.

Spacious, warmth, calm, some distraction, in a moment of wondering what it would be like to notice each moment. To notice everything, to feel love, to feel connected to it all; power of the people in the room. What is my God?

I noticed the voices of the people around me. I noticed the silent space between the prayers and I noticed a sense of safety, being guided with care, ease, and love. And I noticed joy.

Instead of closing my eyes, I wanted to keep them open, to be aware of this place, these people, these moments. I was led, but I also wanted to be an active participant – to offer my energy or attention to everyone else. I felt hope and a part of something bigger. If we could all keep these open hearts and spread this feeling to others...

Calming breathing; anxiety about “correct” harmonizing; insecurities rising up; concern about missing words; despite distractions, a sense of groundedness; centered euphoria.

1. Harmony
2. Inclusion
3. Transitions
4. Trusting



Unity without uniformity

I noticed that I needed a while to feel “in the mood” to *daven*. It is for me such a personal thing, and since when I’m in community I often feel I am playing a role other than just being present as myself. I wasn’t sure I was as into as I perhaps wished I were. But then the music and the awareness of the *kavanah* and power in the room allowed me to open up a bit and by the end sink into more of a genuine prayer experience.

Love the singing – it was transformative. Saw and felt lots of ladders ascending. Didn’t always want to stand –the occasional joy of sitting. Vibrations, light, directionalities. Mostly watched and tried to remember.

Spaciousness, quiet, gentleness, softness.

Rapid opening, longing, going in and out of self-consciousness. Space/container/depth/beauty/unity.

Singing versus listening; less pressure on myself to participate; power in meditating in a room of prayer; physical sensations; breath; uplifted by body and soul movement; love, peace, wholeness.

I loved that we began our singing with the firefighters outside. It reminded me that prayer sanctifies and fills those moments when things don’t go according to plan, whether “mundane” or “holy.” This is especially relevant in my life as I am getting married and moving across the world in the next 2 months. So much feels new and uncertain and our *tefillah* brought me to a place where I could feel into that and experience a catharsis of letting go. Thank you so much!



Privilege of being Jewish and sense of community, even without knowing others. Touched my soul.

It was hard for me to settle into the experience - lots of physical and emotional distraction with moments of catching my breath and being more present. I long for silence.

Quiet; joy; happiness; easy unfolding and softening of my heart; sweet space planted inside of me – unexpected joy, peace; soft, incremental opening.

Peace; serenity; silent space; elevation; connection to others and the divine; light.

It is very difficult to put down my baggage and be with God. When I finally could do that I noticed that it felt very good and then sad because I would like to do this more often. Then I stopped judgment and just enjoyed being with God.

Wanted to move much more – self-conscious in the space with all the seated people. Movement “at the book” is self-consciousness, holding back, *avoda zara!* “V’haya im shamo”... If mitzvot are about connecting with the One then when we do NOT stay in connection there surely ARE consequences; we need to keep reclaiming this paragraph. These mitzvot, not as bludgeons but as potent spiritual technologies.

Felt “enveloped” in a bubble of music; hands empty/full (used to holding siddur); flowed from one prayer to the next (no page announcements); voices of joy surrounding; free to move, sit, stand...

Heart broke open; music and song- gentle – led me in; door opening; wrestled with who am I right now? Letting go of judging myself/judging others, my choices and my responsibilities to be where I want to be.



Institute for Jewish Spirituality

The voices of the people around me; the light filtering in the room; the aches in my body; the feeling of “at-home ness”; the softness of the melodies; people closing their eyes and going with it; a bit of fear lifted; a reminder of connection to the divine; less pressure on myself, a sense it would be OK.