

Spirituality and Prayer in Community Hebrew High Schools

by Bess Adler and
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In order to educate as many Jewish high school students in our community Hebrew high schools as possible about the spirituality inherent in Judaism, and have them experience Jewish spirituality first-hand, it is imperative to include in our programming all three of Neil Gillman's spirituality models: the intellectual, behavioral, and pietistic.

The number of central community Hebrew high schools (CHHS), which draw students from multiple synagogues in addition to unaffiliated families, is growing across the country¹. These schools, as the sole place of consistent formal Jewish learning for their students (and, in some cases, their students' only avenue of engagement in Judaism), have a great, but largely unmet, potential to contribute to the spiritual growth of Jewish adolescents.

Saul Wachs, writing about the lack of prayer engagement and practice in Jewish day school education, points to the danger of "leaving many students unprepared in terms of skills, concepts, and attitudes to appreciate, let alone participate intelligently, in one of the core activities of Judaism."² We can see the same thing happening in the CHHS population. In a survey of CHHS directors conducted by the first author of this article,³ 25 directors of the 30 polled responded that they do not offer prayer at all as part of their programming. Many cited the challenges posed by the multi-denominational nature of many of these schools. Hebrew high schools also are challenged by the paucity of time available for programming, the number of students in any given program, the lack of comfort on the part of the educators themselves, and the perception that teenagers are not interested in praying anyway, so we should not be "turning them off" to Judaism by forcing them to pray. Respondents from the few schools that do hold services reported these services to be most successful at "fostering comfort and familiarity with services," less successful at fostering a spiritual connection, and still less successful at increasing students' ability to recite prayers.

Almost all respondents indicated that their school does something – be it informal, impromptu discussions or structured activities – to address the spiritual needs of teens. However, it is clear that directors are concerned about the work of their faculty in this area, indicating neutrality that their "staff is prepared to address the spiritual needs of the students."

Recommendations for Addressing Prayer and Spirituality in CHHS

Faculty and students must come together as a learning community to create a vision for prayer and spirituality within the CHHS setting. Teachers and students alike come from a range of denominations, backgrounds, and bases of knowledge. Far from "taking time away" from core studies, such conversations should be seen as engaging youth, together with adult faculty, in thinking about the role of prayer and spirituality in their everyday experience, and (in most cases) how this plays out in a multi-denominational setting. CHHS should look to community day schools that have developed models for prayer in such contexts. Professional development for staff should focus on addressing prayer and spiritual issues with adolescents. Faculty members need to learn how to create a "safe space" for the discussion of these potentially difficult issues.

It is important to acknowledge that not every teenager (or child or adult, for that matter) is attracted to spirituality or to the transcendent in the same way. Neil Gillman proposes three models of spirituality: intellectual, behavioral and pietistic.⁴ A fashionable way of stating the models in synagogues today is that there are "head Jews, hand Jews, and heart Jews." In the intellectual model, it is learning that reveals God's will. As the saying goes, "when I pray, I speak to God, and when I study *Torah*, God speaks to me." When educating through the intellectual model, the teacher must carefully choose the texts, demand critical thinking; offer a wide range of intellectual experiences; and always strive to be relevant to the students' lives.

In the behavioral model, the key to spirituality is *halakhah* and social action. As Wachs points out, educating teenagers to feel a sense of *hiyuv* (obligation) to observe the laws of *halakhah* is quite difficult in the American culture of valuing "immediate gratification, privilege and personal autonomy."⁵ But for Jews, even those from movements that do not consider *halakhah* binding, doing *mitzvot* and being involved in social action is of key importance. Wachs insists that engendering "a sense of obligation" towards fulfilling *mitzvot* and towards Judaism in general, "responds to the need of teenagers to find a cause that can inspire loyalty and fidelity."⁶ Teenagers, who more than at any other age are forming their

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identity, crave to feel that they are needed and that their contribution is helpful and makes a difference in the lives of others. Important in the context of teaching and encouraging teenagers in this model of spirituality are the discussion and debates that give intelligent rationale to the observance of *mitzvot*.

Finally, the pietistic model promotes the feeling of transcendence through Jewish forms of worship. It elevates *kavanah*, intention, over *keva*, set routine. For example, enjoying or creating art, music, and dance are ways of meeting the transcendent in our lives. "All of us, at one time or another, have felt an overpowering feeling of amazement while witnessing a striking natural phenomenon or when hearing a great work of music..."⁷ For teenagers, music is an especially powerful tool, and they can be introduced to the works of artists who have put traditional liturgy to modern melodies, as well as to the traditional ones. But the quintessential way of accessing spirituality according to the pietistic model is prayer.

All three of the models described above are authentically Jewish ways of addressing spirituality in our lives. While it is very important to continue to offer teens opportunities to volunteer and work towards *tikkun olam*, and crucial for them to learn Judaism's seminal texts, it is no less important to offer them opportunities to connect spiritually through the pietistic model. Opportunities for prayer and discussions of spirituality should be a regular part of the workings of the school, providing multiple points of engagement. Meal/snack time can be a venue for singing all or part of *Birkat HaMazon*. Classes on texts, culture, and history can touch upon issues of personal meaning for students. Fostering affective connection, in addition to cognitive gains, is a major goal of Jewish education, so opportunities for connecting one's spiritual life with the content matter should be encouraged.

Innovative solutions are needed to address issues of prayer and spirituality. *Shabbatonim*, or retreats, and trips to Israel are, for a variety of reasons, successful ways of integrating prayer and spirituality in the curriculum. Two of the reasons could be that, when away together with the students, educators finally have a significant amount of time to address such matters, and secondly, taking the teenagers away from their routine and immersing them in a different environment, one of total Jewish living, is conducive to a more spiritual atmosphere. An educator commented on teen reactions to prayer services at their school by saying that "in Israel, evaluations show that [prayer services] are appreciated and meaningful perhaps because of the context of an emotional experience. Reactions at *Shabbatonim* are less favorable, but individuals are appreciative of the opportunity." In another school, the most popular and spiritually meaningful part of their activities is the *Havdalah* ritual. It is held outdoors in the dark, with the teens grouped in concentric circles, holding on to one another, swaying to the tunes, and holding candles. The liturgy is chanted to Debby Friedman tunes.

Framing Prayer as a *Mitzvah* and a Vehicle towards Jewish Spirituality

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spirituality first-hand, it is imperative to include in our programming all three of Gillman's spirituality models: the intellectual, behavioral, and pietistic. Prayer is the quintessential means to engage in pietistic spirituality, so it is important for Jewish educators to frame prayer Jewishly and stress its importance as a Jewish *mitzvah*. However, the majority of CHHS do not offer *tefillot* at all as a part of their programming. Community Hebrew high schools are reinforcing the message that prayer as a vehicle towards Jewish spirituality is irrelevant to teens' lives and to Judaism in general. If one of the key ritual practices of Judaism — communal prayer — is abandoned even in its educating institutions, it will be very difficult indeed to perpetuate in this and later generations. ❁

ENDNOTES:

1. Adler, Bess. (2006). *Spirituality and Prayer in Adolescence: The Community Hebrew High School* (unpublished Master's thesis. New York: The William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of The Jewish Theological Seminary, 2006.
2. Wachs, Saul. P. *Teenagers, Spirituality, and Prayer in the Jewish Community Secondary Day School*. Merion Station, PA: Akiba Hebrew Academy Press Center for Educational Initiatives, 1999.
3. Adler, Bess. op. cit.
4. Wachs, Sol. Op cit..
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Brown, S. M. לעלא לעלא *Higher and Higher: Making Jewish Prayer Part of Us*. New York: United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Department of Youth Activities, c1980, 1996.

2006 -2007 CAJE Calendar



2006

- June 15** Late fee for CAJE 31 applies after this date
- June 25 - 28** Early Childhood and Day School Conference
St. John's University, Queens, NY
- August 3 - 6** Pre-Conference of CAJE 31
Duke University, Durham, NC
- August 5** *Shabbat* at CAJE 31
Honoring Eliot Spack, in recognition of his forthcoming retirement and his significant contribution to CAJE and to Jewish education in North America
- August 6 - 10** CAJE 31
- December 31** Deadline for submissions for annual David Dornstein Memorial Creative Writing Contest for Young Adult Writers

2007

- August 5 - 9** CAJE 32 at Washington University in St. Louis