

BETH ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE, WALLINGFORD, CONNECTICUT



The Shofar

Tishrei 5778 - Evening sermon

For the last several years, my prayer book of choice has been *The Koren Siddur*, edited by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who was formerly the chief rabbi of Great Britain. What I like most about it is the layout. Rather than large blocks of text, the Hebrew is set as the poetry it truly is. And the English on the facing page mirrors the Hebrew. I occasionally look at the translations just to see how Rabbi Sacks has treated a particular word or phrase. But for the most part, when I pray alone, I pray exclusively in Hebrew.

Praying in Hebrew is different from praying in English. Under Jewish law, prayer is acceptable in any language that one understands. The important thing is to pray with כונה, which is the Hebrew word for intention. For the longest time, I have taken these two requirements together to mean that praying with intention calls for absolute concentration on the meaning of the words one utters. Now I am not so sure. My own מטביע תפילה - my own formula of prayer - seeks to avoid undo repetition, yet words like redemption, rescue, sovereignty, holiness and every possible synonym for praise appear repeatedly. When one says these

same words multiple times a day, most every day of the week, concentration on their meaning becomes well-nigh impossible.

But in Hebrew, the actual words matter less. It's the experience of saying them that matters. Hebrew prayer has a trance-like quality to it. Once you have trained your tongue to say the words, they fall from your lips in a natural cadence that can remove you - at least a little bit - from the place where you are physically standing. And it is this sense of removal - this sense of being transported - that I now associate with the requirement of כונה.

Prayer in English is different. Being in our native language, our sensitivity to its nuance is far greater. And this sensitivity is heightened because the prayers are translated not just from a foreign language, but also from a foreign time - one far removed from our own and possessing its own nuance of thought. The translator faces the double challenge of not only capturing the nuanced meaning of the original, but then deciding whether that meaning can even be

captured in another language. A simple example is one of my favorite prayers, the one that acknowledges the wondrous nature of the human body which can be found in our מחזורים on pages 82 and 83. It praises God as the One who fashioned נקבים נקבים האדם with wisdom, creating חלולים חלולים. That last phrase literally means “holes that are holes and hollows that are hollow.” Such a phrase would be disconcerting if not outright confusing to most modern worshippers. So instead, our translation renders it “an intricate network of veins, arteries, structures and organs.” Is that what the phrase נקבים נקבים חלולים חלולים really means? Possibly, but it is one of the only translations that can make sense of it. The bigger problem is the word האדם which literally means “the man.” Instead, our translation renders it as “the human body.” No one is going to translate this phrase literally lest one be accused of misogyny. So a text that literally praises God “who fashioned the man with holes that are holes and hollows that are hollow,” becomes “who has fashioned the human body ... creating an intricate network of veins, arteries, structures and organs...” And this is a non-controversial example of problematic translation.

The problems inherent in translation mean that translation itself becomes an ongoing process. As the culture into which you are translating a text changes, the translations themselves have to change in order to keep up. This is very different from the experience of Hebrew prayer where texts have changed very little over huge stretches of time. Two years ago, I attended my rabbinical school’s annual retreat. One morning for our prayer service, we used the siddur or

Rav Sa’adia Gaon who died 1075 years ago. Virtually everything in that siddur is recognizable to a knowledgeable Jew. While there were differences in phrasing and in word order, what amazes about that prayer book is how little has changed over the course of a millennium.

That is not the case with translations. Just in the course of my lifetime the language of translation has changed dramatically - and I am not referring solely to every “Thou” that has become a “You” and every “Thine” that has become a “Yours.” Starting in the early 1990’s and in response to evolving sensitivities, prayer books have sought to become what is called “gender inclusive.” Ancient texts that referred to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have been rewritten to include the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah as well. Other texts that rely heavily on masculine pronouns now get the nouns “God” and “Adonai” in translation. Or they change the translation from third to second person in order to use the neutral pronoun “You” rather than “He.”

For some time I opposed these changes as I felt they corrupted an ancient text. Nevertheless, just raising the issue altered my consciousness of the language of our translations. Now every “He,” “Him,” and “His” evokes in me the fear that someone in the congregation is feeling excluded. So when the closing of Beth El Synagogue in Torrington gave us the opportunity to acquire the newer version of our prayer book - the one with the more gender inclusive language - I grabbed them up. I am not sure how much of a difference these changes make to our congregants, but I do know that

they are in line with the direction in which all prayer translation is moving. Indeed, if you look at the title page of the *מחזור* you are holding in your hand right now, you will see that it is styled the Enhanced Edition. Turn the page and you will learn that the enhancement is the “Expanded Use of Egalitarian English Terminology.”

More revealing of the complications of translation is the *מחזור* we will be using here on Second Day Rosh Hashanah and the afternoon of Yom Kippur. A word of explanation is in order here. *שערי תשובה*, *Gates of Repentance*, is the Reform Movement’s High Holiday *מחזור* published in 1978. It is produced in the format of the movement’s regular prayer book at that time, *שערי תפלה*, *Gates of Prayer*. That prayer book’s most notable feature is that it offers ten separate and distinct Friday night services, ranging from almost traditional to virtually humanistic. I never liked *Gates of Prayer* which struck me as too scripted. But I did like *Gates of Repentance* which to me, supplemented the core of the traditional liturgy with meaningful contemporary readings and reflections. In particular, I remember being moved by its Yom Kippur afternoon service - a service which has the potential for great emotional power, which I have long felt has been lacking here. When Temple Beth Tikvah in Madison decided to switch to the Reform movement’s new *מחזור*, I asked Rabbi Offner if I could have some copies of the older book. She was only too happy to know they might yet be used in worship.

When I sat down this summer to outline our services using that *מחזור*, it had been

twelve years since last I picked it up. I was amazed at how dated it had become. Of course, at nearly forty years old, it predated the move toward egalitarian language by more than a decade. I expected that. But what struck me was the tone of many of the readings. They seemed to be aimed at taking certain messages in our liturgy that were particular to the Jewish people and broadening them to a larger audience. This strikes me as a concern of the Reform movement four decades ago, but not one we share today. Indeed, given how loosely Judaism’s bonds fall on many of our contemporaries, I think we would be more likely today to emphasize the particular over the universal.

Another thing that struck me about this *מחזור* was how it handled the Holocaust in the martyrology section of the Yom Kippur afternoon service. Written a bit more than 30 years after that time, the readings speak to a generation for whom the Holocaust would be a living memory. That, for the most part, is no longer the case. As formative an experience as that massive tragedy may have been a generation or more ago, it needs to be remembered differently today.

Whether or not *Gates of Repentance* will enhance our prayer experience here in 5778 is something we will discover over the next ten days. As one of my favorite readings in that *מחזור* says, “Merely to have survived is not an index of excellence.” So too may it be that all the work of our hands - whether synagogues or sermons or translated prayers - can but serve us a very short while. If there is still life in these forty-year-old translations and interpretations, we will

find it together. And if not, we will, hopefully, be none the worse for the experience.

The bigger question I ask myself is what is the value of translated prayer, given how transient they are? Is praying in translation a fools' errand - providing only the form of prayer without the כונה that makes it soar? Three things keep me from coming to that conclusion. First, it was through translation that was I introduced to prayer. And while I will not - even today - hold myself up as a model to anyone for how to pray, at least I am trying. Second, given my own limitations and flaws, who am I to say what moves and inspires others to the level of intention, introspection and beseeching that prayer requires? And finally, I have learned that, while prayer might be the only path to communicating with God, there are many paths to prayer itself. Study or great triumph may implant in us the desire to pray. Introspection or great tragedy may stir within us the need to pray. And then we will learn for ourselves.

And finally, there is this: the belief that, in truth, the language of prayer is neither Hebrew nor English nor, for that matter any spoken language. I believe that the language of prayer is that of the heart. זָבַחַי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ נִשְׁבָּרָה לִב־נִשְׁבָּר וְנִדְפָּה says the Psalmist - *the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a heart that is broken and contrite*. Not, I think, broken in the sense of despairing, but rather in the sense of being broken open - stripped of all its pride and arrogance. Such a heart will reach beyond what it can understand and seek that which it can only sense is there. Whatever can open such a heart - a joy, a pain, a sense of awe, a spoken poem, a wordless song - that is the stuff on which prayer is built. As we enter these days of נוראים - may that sense of awe, of fear, of wonder - open each of our hearts to that truth that stands before us - unseen, but real.



The Shofar

Tishrei 5778 - Morning sermon

In Hebrew, the word is קהילה. It means community. In the more than hundred years this congregation has existed, much has changed. We have gone from Orthodox to Conservative to God-knows-what. Our method of Shabbat observance is totally altered. Our standards of kashrut are looser and our attitude toward interfaith marriage has undergone a complete reversal. I view all of these changes as good. And I view them that way because they have preserved Beth Israel's most important function: as a קהילה - a community.

Last year on this day, we unveiled plans to rebuild this synagogue of ours. My cousin Jay's model - now on display in our lobby - inspires our members to work toward its realization, and speaks to potential members of our hopes and dreams. What remains is to instill in all of us not merely the beauty of our vision, but its importance as well. That importance rests in our being a community.

Each of us needs a community: a place where we can stand face-to-face, arm-in-arm, and hand-to-hand with others who

share our journey. Beth Israel is such a community. And to watch it work - as I am privileged to do - is an inspiration. I see how the groups that make up our community - our children, our parents, our empty-nesters and our elders - each play a different yet vital role in the lives of all the others. Growing through these roles becomes an ongoing source of purpose and fulfillment that graces our days with meaning.

For those of us who did not grow up among the proliferating forms of social media - Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and the rest - the idea of a virtual community is a contradiction in terms. To us, physical presence is what makes a community a community. We know how hard it is to be physically present in someone's life - especially when that someone is sick or scared or grieving. Yet knowing how important that presence is in precisely in those moments, we face our own fears and show up anyway. In doing so, we comfort others, and strengthen ourselves.

I worry that our younger generation, for whom the virtual world is native ground,

are not being pushed to learn how to be present in the lives of others. And this is where I think that the importance of what we do here rises to the beauty of the physical space to which we aspire.

This past Spring, I met with some of our parents to brainstorm ways in which I could broaden the exposure of the school and the shul to the unaffiliated Jewish community in Wallingford and beyond. One of our parents, Lauren Esposito, told me that she and her daughter Galina spend a lot of time in the public library and suggested that I look into doing some kind of programming there. Perhaps something on parenting, and she recommended a book that I might want to look at.

The book is entitled *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings To Raise Self-Reliant Children* by Dr. Wendy Mogel. For fifteen years Dr. Mogel was a practicing child psychologist dealing with troubled children and, to a large extent, their equally troubled parents. Then she had two kids of her own and, between parenthood, marriage and career, she found herself frenzied and exhausted. A chance invitation to join a friend for Rosh Hashanah services at a nearby shul turned her life around. Convinced from childhood that she didn't like synagogues and didn't like rabbis, she couldn't believe that the service moved her to tears. She returned on Yom Kippur. And then she started attending Friday night services. And then she and her family started lighting candles on Shabbat. And eating dinner in. And avoiding shell-fish. Some time later she decided to take a year off from work to explore her Judaism in depth. These studies would

coalesce into a theory of child rearing drawn from Jewish practice and Jewish ethics.

The book's title provides a beautiful understanding of the most common of childhood experiences. The skinned knee is a blessing when it teaches our children a degree of personal strength and courage. Dr. Mogel draws a parallel between this common childhood trauma and God's call to Abraham to leave behind everything he knew to pursue his mission in life. "Unless your child ventures forth into the world," she writes, "he won't get a chance to learn how to master it and find his place."

This is but one of the many lessons Dr. Mogel believes Judaism teaches us about raising children. In the Torah's command to honor one's father and mother she sees the need to provide our children with role models and the expectation that they will treat their elders with respect. In Judaism's teachings on the human struggle between our good and bad inclinations, the **יצר טוב** and the **יצר הרע**, she sees the need to teach our children the difference between what we need and what we want - cultivating a sense of gratitude toward the one and blessing toward the other. In Judaism's laws of kashrut and its many blessings over food she sees the opportunity to raise our children's consciousness about what they eat and encourage moderation. And in Judaism's sanctification of time she sees an opportunity for family members to slow down and be present in each other's lives.

In relying as she does on religious teachings, Dr. Mogel rediscovers, I

believe, some essential truths about parenting. Looking back at our own skinned knees - which my brother Jay and I earned together trying to jointly coast a tricycle down Saddle Ridge Road's steep and curvy hill - I suppose we did learn something about carrying on in adversity. But while I agree with most of the lessons she draws about child rearing, I feel she has missed the larger context into which they are intended to fit. The problem is evident in her subtitle: *Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*. Ultimately, the purpose of Jewish teachings is not to raise self-reliant children; it is to raise Jews, and Jews have a very different take on self-reliance. As I got deeper into the book, I had the increasing feeling that something was missing. Where was the synagogue? Where was the community?

My answer came four pages from the end of the book. Here is what she writes:

(D)espite the fact that bringing Judaism into my life has yielded astonishing blessings, I have not achieved unambivalent enthusiasm for organized religion. I still carry baggage. It bears the labels "Dislikes being part of a group," "Squirms when sincerity verges near the corny," and "Finds getting through the day hard enough hard enough without extra restrictions or obligations." Sometimes the goodness of the congregants at my synagogue makes me feel venal, cynical and selfish by comparison. Sometimes the idea of ritual and religious obligation annoys or exhausts me.

I am sympathetic to Dr. Mogel's plight and to the baggage that weighs her down. But if her much desired self-reliance has left her unable to cope with others' emotions or her own sense of ritual inadequacy, what is its point? The truth is, for Judaism, the idea of "self-reliance" makes no more sense than that of "virtual community." Judaism emphasizes personal responsibility and moral accountability and it does so precisely because it recognizes that we all need each other. Judaism is not about living alone. The divine covenant - membership in which is what makes us Jews - is not between God and each of us, but between God and all of us. It is between God and the entire nation of Israel. The bulk of Judaism's laws that remain operative since the destruction of the Temple deal with relationships between and among people. As it happens, these are the lessons our kids need the most today, for reasons having to do mostly with a three-by-five rectangle of glass and metal we implant in their hands right around the time they hit adolescence.

Dr. Jean Twenge has dedicated her twenty-five year career in psychology to studying the changes among the generations. Using data that have been collected on teenagers since the 1930's, she has been able to monitor differences in such things as self-perception and social interaction. Generally, these differences have expressed themselves as gradual changes from year-to-year. Then, beginning in 2012, they became large and abrupt. Not coincidentally, 2012 was the year that smartphone ownership crossed 50% of the US population.

Some of these changes are positive. Teen

birth rates last year were down 67% from their peak in 1991. Today's teens are significantly less likely than their parents to get into car accidents, and they have less of a taste for alcohol.

This is the positive side of what has been, essentially, a drastic fall in actual face-to-face interaction between and among teens. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of kids spending time each day with their friends dropped by 40%. 12th graders in 2015 went out less often than 8th graders in 2009. High schoolers wait longer these days to get their driver's licenses, and fewer of them take part time jobs to earn a few bucks for themselves.

Rather than date, kids "talk" which is actually a euphemism for sending text messages and Snap-chatting each other. 56% of today's high schoolers go out on dates compared with around 85% two and three generations ago. So if kids aren't driving and aren't dating and aren't seeing their friends, what are they doing? "They are," writes Dr. Twenge, "on their phone, in their room, alone and often distressed."

She reports that the National Institute on Drug Abuse's *Monitoring the Future* report - which has surveyed high schoolers since 1975 - finds that all screen related activities make kids more unhappy, while all non-screen related activities make them more happy. Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook can all exacerbate feelings of isolation and being left out. The statistics are devastating. From 2012 to 2015, depressive symptoms in boys increased by 21%. In girls, they increased by 50%. And between 2007 and 2015, twice as many

12 to 14 year old boys and three times as many girls committed suicide.

My daughter Sarah, who brought Dr. Twenge's work to my attention, explained it to me this way. "The lives of the people I know," she says, "have become performances. They go on Facebook and their friends are all posting picture of their vacations and the parties they are going to and the food they are eating and my friends ask themselves, 'Why am I not enjoying life like they are?' So their own Facebook posts become a performance to convince themselves and others that they are as happy as everyone else seems to be."

This is obviously a major challenge to parents and to our society as a whole. I am not here to tell you that church or synagogue membership is a cure to the isolation and depression that is at the heart of this problem. But I am here to tell you that this synagogue's very existence is built on the idea of community involvement and caring; that to live a fully and meaningfully Jewish life requires that you interact personally and directly with others.

This synagogue, in the year just past, offered each of us the chance to put up our sukkah with Larry Hyatt and to put out our candles and challah with Tammy Kahn; to allow a new family observe Pesach, and to allow an old friend say Kaddish; to help Bob Gross bury old siddurim and machzorim and to help Shirley Glasner send out happy birthday or anniversary wishes; to give Jack Huber one last hug and to give Nancy Huber or Mimi Bloch one more hug; to have a slice of lox with the Torah study crowd and to

have a slice of birthday cake with Saul Freilich; to explore the meaning of love on Shavuot and to explore the meaning of loss on Tisha B'Av; to plan a celebration with Phyllis Gordon and Sue Burt; to celebrate with Ethan Thomaswick and Josh Rodriguez. Each one of these actions is a mitzvah in the truest sense of that oft misunderstood word. As such, they are not incidental to this synagogue's existence. They are the very reason for it. To bring your children up as participants in such a community is to necessarily raise their gaze beyond the glow of their smartphone screen.

Some of the things a community asks of its members bring great joy. Others are painful and scary. Each exposes us to a new person or a new experience or a new idea - and so each forces us to grow. And each implants within us a sense of meaning in our lives. That is what Beth Israel is all about. Achieving that is what

makes us worthy of the noble designs standing before us.

For all the changes that have taken place in this synagogue over its long history, we have remained a קהילה קדושה - a holy community. We are present for each other and interdependent on one another. As this community has been there for each of us as we have progressed through this lifelong journey of ours, so, with God's help and our own dedication, may it be there in the lives of our children - to instruct them in their youth, to gain strength from them in their vigor, and to honor them and draw wisdom from them in old age. This is the noble task of our community. Our ancestors' work, and God's blessing, have given it to us as an inheritance. For our children's sake, may this community grow and thrive and be stronger for having been in our care.