

My *Minyan* Story

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In tenth grade at my liberal Orthodox high school in Manhattan, I was not so into *davening* (praying). It did not involve any of my teen interests: sports, girls, and science fiction or computer games. Nor did it seem very logical. We would ask for rain and other things, but I could not see any correlation to what was actually happening in the world.

But each day began the same way—mandatory *davening* first thing in the morning. I was usually tired from my commute or much more focused on cramming for a quiz, catching up on the Mets, or completing my math homework. Other times, I just wanted to hear how Howie or Marc's weekend went.

I have to confess that some days I would skip *davening* altogether, preferring to spend the time ensconced in the boys' locker room or in an empty stairwell.

One such morning—busted; a teacher found me in the stairwell. I was sent to Rabbi Beiler's office to discuss my "*davening* problem." He was a kindly young rabbi with whom I shared an immediate rapport. I told him of the various teen and school pressures that were hurting my rather weak attempts at spirituality and that I simply did not believe in prayer—how could my words move God or have any impact on the universe?

After pleading my case for half an hour, I felt like I made some inroads towards lessening my sentence, convincing Rabbi Beiler I was not simply another *davening* drop-out, when he surprised me. Not only was I not being given any punishment, but he reassured me, stating: "And you should know, some people are not meant to *daven*—they just don't have that ability."

Wow! I was saved. Not only did I not suffer the consequences of spending *davening* in the seventh floor staircase studying for my math test, but I was also the holder of a legitimate condition which was not my fault. What a relief!

I shared this with my parents hoping that this new information could exempt me from mandatory attendance at Shabbat morning services. No such luck. But with this diagnosis, I did feel better about myself. For the next five years, I distanced myself from *davening*—still attending services regularly for the social benefits (a reason that still holds to this day), but not feeling any spiritual connection.

That started to change in the middle of college as I started to take courses in philosophy and Jewish mysticism, attempting to integrate what I was studying with traditional Jewish practices including prayer. My path, however, was initially more focused on the intellect than on the soul. I studied with Rabbi Neil Gillman and read Heschel, striving to integrate my philosophical understandings of the world with a religious outlook. That led me to study at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and, while I started to don *tefillin* each day and pray regularly, I was not yet feeling the power of prayer. It took a particular *minyan* need to address that.

The need arose at Pardes, which, although being the most liberal *yeshiva* at that time, was Orthodox and as such had an official *minyan* led by a charismatic Orthodox rabbi. (Now, there is the Conservative *Yeshiva* which I highly recommend.) The problem was that this *minyan* was not egalitarian (a place where men and women could participate equally), and men and women were separated by a *meḥitzah* (physical barrier).

I was part of a group of students who organized an egalitarian *minyan*. One young woman was saying *Kaddish*, and the *minyan* turned to me to help lead services. Suddenly, prayer was not simply a personal experience that I was or was not having, but a response to the need of another. This profoundly changed the experience for me. *Davening* became more

about the *minyan* than the *tefillah* itself. I was also motivated to make egalitarianism an option in Israel, ultimately leading egalitarian services beyond the walls of Pardes to the Kotel and other sites around Jerusalem.

These *minyanim* forced me to confront not only the experiences I had rejected years earlier, but also to reexamine the liturgy that I had found wanting in my teen years.

What I found was a treasure-trove of our people's strivings, yearnings, and world-view. While certain passages needed trans-valuation (new interpretations), mostly I discovered a sophisticated system of how to approach the day. Prayer helped me heighten my awareness and develop a sense of gratitude that has the potential for serious introspection and self-improvement.

For the last 18 years, I have been trying to open myself up to the experience of prayer. It is not always easy. There are still some mornings and some days when *davening* is the farthest thought from my mind—my children, life, work, and other interests pull me away—but, like the committed athlete who runs each morning, I *daven* in all weather and all moods. It does not always take me to spiritual heights, but it does give me moments of profound awareness and connection in a overly busy and disconnected world.

And while *davening* at home with my kids is wonderfully special, as is in the middle of woods on a hike, there is something unique about *davening* in a *minyan*, especially our Temple Emunah daily *minyan*. Here we have spiritual seekers, those who appreciate the community's needs mixing with mourners and those who fulfill the tradition's requirement to daven in a *minyan*, all coming together to make sure we still are one of the few *shuls* in our area with morning and evening *minyanim* every day of the year.

Thanks to the efforts of our *minyan* leaders and captains (who greet *minyan* attendees and call pages), Kathy Macdonald, and our Religious Committee, we have a strong *minyan* that has been aided by our 10-for-10 program and our new birthday *minyan* program, honoring our young people at the first *minyan* in which they can be counted.

But *minyanim* like ours need constant support. Let me encourage you all to try to attend more often; if you have not yet participated in 10-for-10 (coming to our daily *minyan* ten times over the year), please do. While walking into an unfamiliar service is intimidating, your presence is highly valued, and there are members of the *minyan* who will take you under their wing. Fewer and fewer people have learned traditional *davening* skills in their youth.

Our community deepens our experience of *davening* with classes on Wednesday mornings and Shabbat afternoons that touch on aspects of *tefillah* from the spiritual to the historical to the *halakhic* (Jewish legal and practical). *Ivrit la-Kol* offers many Hebrew courses that provide keys to unlocking the wisdom of the *siddur*. In addition, our lay leaders offer courses in how to lead *davening* and read Torah and *Haftarah* (see page 4) which, when combined with CDs that Rabbi Jacobs recorded of all the various services, can bring the *davening* experience much closer to more of us.

While there are many reasons to *daven* and to do so in a *minyan*—supporting mourners, fulfilling our religious obligations, connecting to other Jews, sustaining the community, and connecting with God and the deepest aspects of ourselves—we need to make sure that we can more deeply relate to the experiences. Beyond the classes and Hebrew study I mentioned above, here are a few tips that have helped me:

- 1) The need for **your own prayer book**—one in which you can take notes. My *siddur* has almost two decades of notes that have made prayer part of my life and my soul. Write in your *siddur* what a prayer means, its history, and, especially, what it means to you!

- 2) **Read commentaries** like the *Or Hadash Siddur*, which is our prayer book with a wrap-around commentary that adds much to our experience of prayer. *Maḥzor Lev Shalem* does this remarkably well with the High Holy Day prayer book.

3) **Movement is vital** to *davening*. Try to extend beyond your inhibitions to mumble the prayers, and move! *Shuckeling*, moving back and forth in traditional prayer, was always part of the experience as is swaying, dancing, bowing, prostrating, etc.

4) **Compose your own prayers**. I complete each *Amidah* with my own closing prayer. As you can imagine, this adds a great deal of personal meaning to my *davening*.

5) **Have a focus** for each prayer service or moment. For example, if you are coming to *Minhah* and *Ma'ariv* and have two *Amidot* to recite back to back, you might want to create a different focus for each—perhaps looking back on the day, evaluating actions that took place in the first *Amidah*, and then looking into the future for the second.

Most important is to keep growing in our exploration of traditional prayer, so we can appreciate how it has the power to touch us and teach us valuable moral lessons that are embedded in the text. As opposed to Rabbi Beiler, I believe we can all *daven*, if we are open to it.

And as we embark on the new year of 5771, may we support our Temple Emunah *minyan*.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu—may you be written for a good year,

Rabbi David Lerner