Believing, Behaving, Belonging:
Tefillah Education in the 21st Century

NICOLE MICHELLE GRENINGER

Tefillah is a central component of the curriculum at many congregational schools. Yet despite the time and resources that congregational schools dedicate for “tefillah education,” large numbers of Jews (both children and adults) continue to feel uncomfortable and incompetent in Jewish worship. This research begins to answer the question, “How might we better prepare our children for entry into Jewish communal worship throughout their lives?” Through case studies of three synagogues with reputations for strong, innovative education programs as well as vibrant worship, I discovered that it is possible to succeed in tefillah education if “success” is defined narrowly: believing, behaving, or belonging.

WELCOMING THE NEXT GENERATION OF JEWISH PRAY-ERS

It is 5:30 p.m. on a rainy Tuesday afternoon, and I am sitting with my fifth grade class in the sanctuary of a large urban Reform congregation. All around me kids whisper, giggle, talk, and fidget in the pews. They make inappropriate noises. They pass notes. They play with their cell phones. I do everything I can to get them to pay attention, to join in prayer with the song-leader up front, who is trying valiantly to get the students to notice him. I repeatedly shush the kids. I ask them politely to please stop talking, open their siddurim, and join us in prayer. When that fails, I switch gears and try instead to be a role model, diligently participating in the service myself, as if it were a meaningful, powerful, prayerful experience for me (which, unfortunately, it is not). We run through prayer after prayer, song after song, until finally we dismiss the kids and they run out of the sanctuary as fast as possible.

Nicole Michelle Greninger is Director of Education at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette, California. E-mail: rabbi.greninger@gmail.com

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This scene plays itself out in countless synagogues around the country year after year. And yet, is this how we want our children to learn prayer? Does this scene represent the images we want our children to associate with Jewish communal worship? Religious school services in which students are bored and teachers are frustrated serve as one component of “tefillah education” in most congregational, supplementary schools. In many synagogues, what I call “tefillah education” for youth includes weekly religious school services, Hebrew instruction for the sake of learning how to read from the sidduρ, and lessons geared toward greater understanding of key prayers (such as V'ahavta, Avot, Oseh Shalom, etc.).

However, one might ask, despite the large amount of time and resources that congregational schools currently dedicate for tefillah education, why do so many Jews—both children and adults—still feel uncomfortable and incompetent in Jewish worship? Furthermore, given that only a small percentage of liberal Jews in America attend worship services regularly (once a month or more),¹ could it be argued that the lack of regular participation is, in part, due to the absence of high-quality tefillah education? Surely it is true that good worship “does not happen automatically,” and unfortunately, as Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman (1999) points out, “much that passes for worship in church or synagogue is baffling or banal to most of the people who find their way there” (p. 10). But, as books, synagogue transformation programs, and consultants try to help synagogues improve their worship, where are our communal efforts toward improving education for worship? I believe that improving the status quo is both desirable and possible. This research attempts to answer the question, “How might we better prepare our children for entry into Jewish communal worship throughout their lives?”

Although many synagogues struggle with tefillah education, I believe that there are people and places that are highly talented, deeply committed to, and decidedly successful at tefillah education. As a result, I began this research by looking for non-Orthodox congregations that succeed in the realm of tefillah education in order to find out what could be learned from them. Rabbis Jan Katzew and Lawrence Hoffman pointed me to congregations that are known in North America for their strong, innovative education programs as well as their vibrant worshipping communities; and I chose three synagogues to study, based on size, location, reputation, and branch of Judaism. I tried to determine how tefillah education happens at each of these congregations: In what ways do education and worship overlap in the synagogue system?; How did the current system come to be?; What are the congregation’s goals for tefillah education?; What have been their successes?; and What are their ongoing challenges?

For each case study I conducted intensive interviews, made personal observations, and collected relevant documents. I interviewed the rabbi(s), cantor, educator(s), 1–2 teachers, 1–2 parents, and 1–2 students. In addition, I recorded and transcribed each interview for further examination. I also observed the following events: Friday night services, Saturday morning services, religious school classes, religious school services, family education programs, and special tefillah program(s), where applicable. Finally, I collected anything that would help me better understand tefillah education in the congregation: the religious school handbook; educational mission/vision statements; congregational flyers and newsletters; and educational materials such as books, workbooks, and curricula guides.

I discovered in the course of conducting these case studies that, despite many areas of divergence among the three synagogues, there were many areas of convergence as well. At the end of this article I have summarized a few of those areas of convergence (including areas of success and common challenges). As a result, I hope this research will prove helpful to people looking to improve tefillah education in their synagogues.

BELIEVING: TEFILLAH EDUCATION AT TEMPLE SINAI

Temple Sinai: An Overview

Temple Sinai\textsuperscript{2} is a large urban Reform synagogue in the Western United States. With more than 2,000 families, a clergy team of seven, and a staff of well over 100 people, the synagogue is currently one of the largest in North America. Temple Sinai boasts an extremely wide variety of programs, classes, and resources. From social action projects to art exhibits, from concerts by distinguished musicians to lectures by world-renowned speakers, the offerings at Temple Sinai are vast. With significant financial resources and a reputation for excellence, Sinai has established itself as one of the most prominent Reform congregations in the 21st century.

Among the thousands of people who maintain membership at Sinai, there is incredible diversity. Member households include a significant percentage of inter-faith families; gay and lesbian families; and people of many different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Temple Sinai saw a major influx of new members in the last decade, including sizeable numbers of previously unaffiliated Jews, in large part due to a “voluntary dues” program that was introduced about 10 years ago.

\textsuperscript{2}Names and identifying features of all synagogues and people involved in my case studies have been changed to protect their privacy. I would like to thank everyone I met and from whom I learned in the three synagogues I studied, particularly the educators. Although I cannot thank each of you by name, I want you to know that it is through your kindness, openness, and honesty that I was able to learn so much about tefillah education in your congregations.
Tefillah at Temple Sinai

For most of its history, Temple Sinai has been a beacon of classical (German) Reform Judaism. The main sanctuary is a vast, majestic space with the capacity to seat 1,700 people. Recently renovated, the sanctuary boasts a gleaming white marble bima, stunning stained glass windows with over 200 different colors, and massive chandeliers that glitter as they hang from the soaring ceiling. Services in the main sanctuary are usually conducted in the “classical Reform” (high-church) style of worship, complete with a professional choir, organist, and a cantor with a beautiful, booming voice. Due to both the architecture and the style of worship, Sinai’s main sanctuary services are awe-inspiring for some, but tremendously intimidating for others. Whereas many Reform congregations have shifted away from “classical Reform” worship, Temple Sinai continues to offer classical Reform services on a weekly basis.

Fifteen years ago, the leadership at Temple Sinai decided to renovate their auditorium and turn it into an alternative sanctuary space seating several hundred people. Since that time, the number of worship opportunities at Sinai have exploded. Instead of offering one Friday night service and one Saturday morning service (both in a classical Reform style), Sinai now offers seven or eight different kinds of worship services on a regular basis. When I asked about tefillah at Temple Sinai, Rabbi Laurie Klein responded, “I can’t say anything about tefillah here; I can [only] talk about tefillot.” As the senior rabbi, Rabbi Dennis Blum explains:

> We [adapted] the concept of “Synaplex”—multiple worship opportunities—so that we could leave the classical Reform service essentially the same (though we’ve warmed it up a bit over the years), but add all of these other opportunities. The notion is the sum of the parts is greater than the sum of the whole. If you have only one worship service, you get a number of people. But if you have two worship services, you get a much larger pool of people who will show up. So we have seven or eight kinds of services. Some people would never set foot in one or the other. It’s transformed the way the congregation offers worship [and] it attracts people.

As Rabbi Blum explained, Temple Sinai has adapted the “synaplex” model of Shabbat worship and engagement. Piloted in 2003, “Synaplex” is an initiative of STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) that provides funding to congregations so that they may offer many different ways for people to celebrate Shabbat in the synagogue. The name Synaplex was chosen because it recalls the experience of going to the “Cineplex”—a multiple-movie-theater venue where a menu of different offerings is presented simultaneously. Similarly, congregations participating in Synaplex provide a “menu” of options for celebrating Shabbat, in order to provide
many different entry points to participation in Jewish life in general and Shabbat observance in particular. Temple Sinai has adapted this model by offering a wide variety of Shabbat worship options for the community.

Temple Sinai currently offers a “classical Reform” Shabbat service at 5:30 p.m. and another “contemporary” Shabbat service at 6:00 p.m. and/or 7:30 p.m. every single Friday night. To catch a glimpse of the breadth of tefillah at Sinai, one need only look at the monthly options for Friday night worship including—among other things—off-site tefillah, tefillah specifically geared toward young adults (in their 20s and 30s), tefillah designed for families with children, and even a “jazz-inspired” tefillah (Jewish worship with jazz melodies). As Cantor Barbara Green joked, “It’s like ‘pick your poison!’ (laughter) Whatever you want to do, we’ve got it. It’s all there.”

Saturday morning worship at Temple Sinai is somewhat less varied than Friday night worship, but it is nevertheless multifaceted. On most Shabbat mornings there are two services at 10:30 a.m.: one in the main sanctuary, and one in the alternative (smaller) sanctuary. The main sanctuary service is classical Reform with a choir, organ, cantor, and rabbi. The “minyan service” (as congregants call it) is a “contemporary” service, described by Rabbi Klein in the following way:

We say “contemporary,” but it’s actually more traditional, but with guitar. The shaliach tziqur [prayer leader] plays guitar, we have percussion instruments, and a rabbi also leads the service. It’s much more a sense of participation, where people are davenning3 and singing together, almost exclusively in Hebrew, the entire service.

In addition to the two services that happen every Saturday morning—the “main” and “minyan” services—there is a monthly lay-led minyan (service) and a monthly family service for those with young children.

Over the years there has been some tension among the clergy regarding the various worship styles. Some feel more comfortable with the “classical” model of worship and others prefer the “contemporary.” Cantor Barbara Green has been especially dedicated to maintaining a weekly service that is classical Reform:

[For me], the idea of having guitars and all this warm fuzzy stuff going on doesn’t feel like prayer to me. It feels like a kumsitz (sitting around the campfire). It feels like everybody is just kind of singing along . . . but for me, it’s empty. I find that a very empty experience. I don’t enjoy it. I love either (traditional) davenning or high church. The camp-y, folk-y, guitar-y thing is really hard for me . . . Unless it’s

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3Daven is a Yiddish word that means “to pray,” “to recite Jewish liturgical prayers,” and/or “to sway or rock lightly.”
done so exquisitely well, it’s extremely hard for me. I think prayer should be an inspirational and exquisite experience for people . . . to get down to that wonderful, worshipful, spiritual feeling.

Rabbi Klein, on the other hand, feels much more comfortable with the “contemporary” style:

I grew up in a classical Reform suburban congregation, and it always felt like there was this very large distance between me and what was going on, which made it hard for me to find myself in worship. So I’m driven by a sense of finding yourself in worship: not having too much distance, but not being [smothered]. It’s having a balance so that as people, individual worshippers can find their own space, and be drawn into community at the same time. I think that, as a rabbi or shaliach tzibbur [prayer leader], there’s a delicate balance between having that distance and then, you know, having too much of where it’s you and a million people praying together all the time. So I think it’s a balance between . . . a sense of doing your own tefillah, but also being in a communal space.

Interestingly, although Cantor Green and Rabbi Klein prefer very different styles of worship, their worship goals are more or less the same: to create a prayer experience that is meaningful and feels personally satisfying for themselves and for others. Along with the other clergy at Temple Sinai, both women want tefillah to move people—emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually. They simply have different ideas about the best way to reach that goal. As we will discover in other synagogues, tefillah goals are not necessarily the same from one community to the next, and it is interesting that despite widely divergent modes of worship at Sinai, the worship goals remain almost the same.

Education at Sinai: Non-Traditional “Tefillah”

Not surprisingly, the primary goal of tefillah education at Temple Sinai is to make prayer an accessible, meaningful experience for children and adults so they will feel comfortable integrating Jewish prayer into their lives. Tirza Friedland, Director of Youth and Family Education, explains her perspective on tefillah education:

I feel very very strongly that being able to pick up a siddur and read any prayer in Hebrew is not the skill I want my students to get out of the program. In the amount of time that we have, there is no way that these kids are going to become fluent Hebrew readers and understand what they’re reading. It’s not possible. [Of course,] I want them to be able
to recognize and identify and read key prayers, but more importantly, I want them to have an idea of what these prayers are about, where they come from, why Jews pray in community, what it’s all about, and ultimately what does it mean to me as a 12-year-old, 13-year-old, or 11-year-old growing up in the 21st century?

[This is] because I believe that 5 years from now, 10 years from now, when they hit problems in life they may not have now, when they bump into the stuff that life throws at you, that being able to read the words in the prayer-book may not give them the source of strength that they need. But if they can think back, “When we studied the V’ahavta, I thought about X, Y, and Z,” then perhaps that will bring them back into the prayer-book, or just give them a source of strength. If somewhere in their souls, and somewhere in their minds, and somewhere in their hearts, they remember “there was a prayer—something I studied, or I learned about . . . that God is my salvation, or God is my rock” . . . that vocabulary, then it might take them back into the prayer-book.

So our goal is not fluent Hebrew reading or fluent davenning. If we’re preparing our kids to go out into the world, and their Judaism is supposed to be the center inside that they can turn to, then fluent Hebrew reading is not what they need. [Therefore] our goal is a real sense of, “Why pray? What do all these prayers mean? And why pray Jewishly?”

Educators at Temple Sinai have made a conscious choice to focus more on the affective, cognitive, and spiritual elements of prayer (“How do I feel about prayer? What do I believe? What is my ‘makom’ [spiritual place] for prayer?”) rather than on the behavioral elements (“How do I pray?”). A Jewish way of thinking about this dichotomy is through the terms keva and kavanna. Keva literally means “set” or “fixed,” and it refers to the structure of Jewish prayer, the liturgy that’s typically recited in a service, the set “form” of Jewish prayer. Kavanna, on the other hand, means “intention.” When talking about prayer, the term kavanna generally refers to the affective, spiritual dimension of praying, the extent to which a person feels connected to and/or moved by prayer. Tirza admits that at Temple Sinai, “kavanna is a real strength of our program; keva is not.”

Tefillah is integrated into all components of religious education at Temple Sinai. At the beginning of youth and family education classes there is a school-wide “opening tefillah” in the alternative sanctuary. It begins with Hebrew songs one might find at a camp song session, such as David Melech Yisrael. Two song leaders (one adult and one teenager) play instruments such as guitar and keyboard, and they encourage participation by using hand motions, body movements, clapping, games, and more. Students sit by grade (chavurah) with their teachers and/or parents, and the words to V’ahavta hang on large banners at the front of the sanctuary.
Eventually the singing stops and Rabbi Lev Schiffman—whom everyone calls “Rabbi Lev” or “Lev”—leads one or two rounds of “Lev Omer” (like the game “Simon Says,” but in Hebrew). Finally, when Lev has everyone’s attention, the tefillah officially begins with Modeh Ani (on Sunday mornings) or Hinei Mab Tov (on Wednesday afternoons) and continues with Barchu, Sh’mah, and V’ahavta—without the use of prayer-books. Tefillah ends with the recitation of the blessing for the study of Torah (la’asok b’divrei Torah), and Lev or Tirza dismisses the students one chavurah at a time.

I was surprised to find so few formal liturgical prayers during Temple Sinai’s youth/family education tefillah. Modern Hebrew is abundant, but liturgical Hebrew is rather sparse. I asked Tirza why they decided to include certain prayers and leave others out:

I think it was kind of organic. You need the Barchu because that’s where you bring everybody together, that’s the call to worship. And the Sh’mah is key. That used to be all we did. Then about 2½ or 3 years ago we started—when we did the year of Torah and we wrote a Torah scroll ourselves . . . we presented something about the weekly Torah portion in the opening circle [i.e., opening tefillah]. And then Rabbi Lev really wanted to do the V’ahavta and teach everyone to chant it, so that’s really when we started to add that. In the first year, I think we just did a couple of lines at a time. Now we do the whole thing.

At Temple Sinai, the desire to lead the children in only a few short prayers rather than all (or even most of) the key prayers in a regular shachrit, mincha, or ma’ariv service makes sense for the congregation’s goals. Behavior—the ability to daven (recite) a full Jewish service—is simply not Temple Sinai’s educational goal. A shorter, more interactive tefillah experience better suits Tirza’s goals of engendering emotional, cognitive, and spiritual attachments to prayer.

If tefillah is not entirely traditional on Sunday mornings and Wednesday afternoons (when youth/family education takes place), it is even less so at the start of weekday sessions on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday afternoons. Weekday classes always begin with “tefillah,” if the word “tefillah” is understood quite loosely. Tirza or one of the teachers leads a 10–15 minute tefillah experience based on a weekly theme, such as shalom (wholeness), boda’ah (gratitude), or makom (refuge). As Tirza explains, “We really try to bring a meditative or reflective element to [Weekday Torah tefillah]. It’s very creative, dynamic . . . taking the essence of the prayers sometimes and working it back, as opposed to just saying the prayers.”

The following is an example of how Tirza has led creative tefillah with the students at the beginning of weekday classes:

With the kids, for Sh’mah, [I used wheel-within-a-wheel]: Basically, you have one circle of people on the outside, and one circle on the inside;
they’re facing each other, and they talk to each other. First I asked the question “What do you like to listen to?” [Students answered the question to the person facing them in the inner/outer circle.] Then we changed people and I asked, “What are things in your life that are unique, that there’s only one of?” And then it was, “Well, take what you like to listen to, and that one thing, and put them together. . . . What does it look like? What does it feel like?” Part of the wheel within a wheel technique that I do is deep listening, where the first person has 45 seconds to talk, and the other person is just listening. You don’t nod, you don’t speak; you just listen. And then you switch. Then at the end I said, “Just in the same way that when I was talking you were completely listening to me, that’s what God is doing when we say Sh’mah. God is totally listening to us.” And then we said Sh’mah.

Weekday tefillah sometimes takes place with the whole school, and sometimes it occurs within each individual classroom. I observed tefillah in the classroom of a skillful teacher who led her sixth grade class in a guided meditation. The teacher encouraged the students to close their eyes, focus on their breathing, and pay attention to various parts of their bodies as she guided them. After the brief meditation, she asked the students to open their eyes, and the class had a short discussion about the experience and how it was related to the theme of the week, “Makom.” The teacher clearly felt comfortable with this type of activity, with helping students develop a sense of inner peace and spiritual connection.

Tefillah at Temple Sinai is not defined by the recitation of Hebrew prayers in a particular order; rather, educators use “tefillah” to help students think and feel in particular ways. Through tefillah students work out their beliefs about God, their feelings about Judaism, and their understanding of themselves as spiritual beings. Tirza and many of the teachers speak in soft, gentle, peaceful tones, and their voices help to create the spiritual “makom” within the walls of the synagogue to which they aim. A number of years ago Tirza participated in an educators’ cohort of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS), and as a result of that program, Tirza has adapted many practices and ideas from Hasidism, the Renewal movement, and the Reconstructionist movement for tefillah education at Temple Sinai.

Though one might assume that the congregational leaders of Sinai would be conflicted about which style of tefillah to educate toward (since styles of tefillah are so drastically different from one Shabbat service to the next), it has not come up as a major educational issue. What kind of worship to educate for does not necessarily matter if the school’s goals are to create a prayerful environment and to engender kavanna. However, it is worth noting that the congregation does want its school to help prepare its students for participation in congregational worship, and the school addresses that goal through its Sixth Grade “Shabbat Exchange” program. Students in sixth grade are required to come to Temple Sinai with their parents for eight
consecutive Shabbat mornings (in lieu of their Sunday or weekday classes) in order to learn about Shabbat liturgy and participate in a congregational Shabbat service (either the “main” service or the “minyan” service). This program helps sixth graders feel more comfortable with the Shabbat services they will encounter when they become bar/bat mitzvah the following year.

**Teacher Tefillah**

One of the ways that Temple Sinai helps students find connection to prayer is to help the teachers to feel more connected to prayer. Tirza realizes that prayer is every bit as important for the synagogue’s teachers as it is for the students, and she therefore decided to require “teacher tefillah” before every weekday class (an extra 15-minute block added into the teachers’ contracts):

One teacher supervises the students and the rest of us gather together for a little tefillah. Each time, a different teacher has the opportunity to bring a prayer, a poem, a meditation, a song . . . whatever it might be, it [is meant to] give us that transition. Because we’re all coming off of busy days as well. If we’re really serious about teaching Torah, then we need to be in the mindset of teaching Torah. We need to stop for a moment and say, “Okay, how do I get into that mindset?” Also, it helps to create community. We talk so much about learning communities, but what about praying communities?

Each week there is a different theme for teacher tefillah (the same theme used in student tefillah), and teachers sign up to lead. On the day that I visited teacher tefillah, there were 12 teachers sitting around a table, and the weekly theme was “Makom.” A male teacher handed out two pages with texts/meditations/teachings related to the theme, and the rest of us silently read the texts for about 5 minutes. The following is just one example of the texts we read:

*Awareness Meditation*

*Place in Hebrew is “Makom,” one of the names of God. The Place of Creation with all its worlds and dimensions is nothing other than God Himself in the context of Makom. When we meditate on Place/Makom we are gazing onto God. The whole of creation is nothing other than God.*

*When we focus on Makom we awaken the awareness of the absolute One within our self/mind.*

After giving us time to quietly read the texts, the teacher led a short discussion which mainly focused on the students: What do we want for them?; What have we tried?; How do we create a *makom* that’s good for
them? There was brief mention of our own (i.e., the teachers’) prayer lives, but the conversation primarily focused on the students’ prayer lives.

I found it interesting that “teacher tefillah” wasn’t exactly tefillah, although I should not have been surprised since “student tefillah” is not exactly “tefillah” in a traditional sense either. I assumed there would be some kind of prayer or ritual component to the teacher tefillah, which was not the case. I asked Tirza whether teacher tefillah is usually similar to what I had experienced, or whether it sometimes included the recitation of traditional Jewish prayers:

It’s all been that reflective thing. It’s creating that makom tefillah, but it’s not “tefillah” [in the traditional sense] . . . [Our] teachers feel more comfortable with kavanna than with keva. One of the things that’s really astonishing in our program is that almost all of my teachers are comfortable talking about God. At least using the word, or Adonai, or whatever they use. That’s huge.

Teacher tefillah is a useful lens through which we can view tefillah education at Temple Sinai. Although the ability to recognize and recite certain Hebrew prayers is valued, it is not the primary goal of tefillah education in the congregation. The goal is to create a space and a mood that is conducive to prayer, to encourage discussion about God and religion, and to help people access and express their inner spiritual lives. Prayer—at least in a traditional sense—is not part of teacher “tefillah” at all. Rather, it is about centering yourself, distinguishing between the sacred and the profane, and reflecting on your spirituality and the spiritual lives of your students.

Closing Thoughts

At Temple Sinai, tefillah education does not focus on the rote memorization of Jewish prayers, nor does it aim to teach students to daven (pray/recite prayers) in a traditional sense. While most students educated at Temple Sinai do leave with a grasp of a few key prayers in a Jewish service, they are not trained to become strong Hebrew readers or steeped in liturgical knowledge. Rather, the goals of tefillah education at Sinai are weighted heavily in the realm of kavanna—on beliefs, feelings, theology, and a sense of spirituality—which makes it difficult to measure success.

Tirza does not think it is possible to fully measure success in tefillah education at Sinai. To succeed at tefillah education, according to Sinai’s definition of success, is to internalize prayer, to feel that it is an integral part of one’s life, to explore one’s beliefs about God, and to find prayer personally meaningful. Teachers can lead discussions and ask students to spend time journaling about their thoughts and feelings, and therefore it might be possible to gauge a student’s current connection to prayer. However, Tirza
believes that the best way to measure success would be to find out whether kids who grow up at Temple Sinai feel connected to prayer and to Judaism when they are grown. Have they continued to find meaning and comfort in Jewish prayer in college or beyond? Do they want to connect to tefillah as adults? I agree with Tirza that, short of longitudinal sociological studies, it would be difficult to find out how well Temple Sinai’s educational practices inculcate a sense of spirituality and connection to God and prayer in the long term. However, I wonder whether Temple Sinai could develop ways to measure the short-term impact of tefillah education on its students.

Tirza recognizes that there is an inherent tension between teaching for keva and teaching for kavanna, and she acknowledges the price Sinai pays for its choice to focus on kavanna:

We’ve done a pretty good job of beginning to set up kavanna, and the purpose of tefillah, and that praying in community is important. But I don’t think our students are comfortable with the siddur; I don’t think they’re all that comfortable with the words of the prayers. The balance is really really hard. I want the students to understand the purpose of prayer, and to actually play with, “What does it feel like to pray?” And [I want them] to feel good about it—if feel] that praying is a good thing to do, and [realize that] it can come from the words on the page, [and] it can come from what’s in your heart. I think what we’re striving for is . . . to try to go beyond the performance piece, go beyond “I know this” and into “What does this mean for me?” I think even the little kids can do that.

By focusing their energy on teaching kavanna, Temple Sinai’s leaders have sacrificed their students’ mastery of (and comfort with) keva. However, that is a conscious choice the educators and clergy have made, and they believe it is a choice that best suits their current goals for tefillah education.

BEHAVING: TEFILLAH EDUCATION AT
KEHILLAT BETH ISRAEL

Kehillat Beth Israel: An Overview

Kehillat Beth Israel (KBI) is a suburban Conservative synagogue in the Eastern United States with a membership of approximately 900 households. According to educator Linda Kohn, KBI is located in a “very nice, married, stable community,” where “the divorce rate is low” and there is “no ‘bad’ or ‘seedy’ neighborhood.” KBI considers itself to be a traditional, right-wing Conservative shul, and many of its families come from Orthodox or “Conservadox” backgrounds. Rabbi Steve Goldberg, who has been the rabbi of KBI for almost 30 years, explains his view of the congregation as “a place for non-Orthodox Jews who want intensive Jewish living”:
My advocacy has been that there are a variety of spiritual paths that a person can follow. That same person may follow different paths at different parts of their lifetime, and different people in the [same] household may follow different paths. We’ve really had three paths—Torah, which is the learning path; *Avodah she*balev,* [which is] spirituality [including tefillah]; and *g’millut chasadim* [acts of loving-kindness], the hands-on stuff. Through focus groups and our engagement with strategic planning, we’ve actually increased to two others as well, which clearly are very important to people. One is the “*chevre*” path. There’s something sacred about building a bond of friendships and being involved in a *kehillah kedosha* [a holy community]. And then the fifth path is the path of people-hood—engaging with Jewish communities, Jewish issues, Jewish people, Jewish life in places throughout the U.S, throughout the world, and throughout Israel. . . . So there are five paths. My view of the world is that we are a place for non-Orthodox Jews who want intensive Jewish living, in any of those five foci.

Rabbi Goldberg is not exaggerating when he describes KBI as a place for “intensive Jewish living.” In a congregation of 900 households—approximately 1300–1350 people—there are approximately 400 adults who attend tefillah each week, 200 adults involved in regular adult learning, 150 adults involved in ongoing Israel programming, and another “couple hundred” adults involved in *tikkun olam* endeavors. As Rabbi Goldberg notes,

30% [of the congregation involved in tefillah] on a weekly basis is not a trivial number! And if you look at it monthly, it’s probably more like 40–50%. So that’s a pretty good number. We get a lot of people involved in a lot of stuff. There’s some overlap, but it’s a lot of different people.

The desire of the leadership at KBI to attract a core group of people who favor “intensive Jewish living” has led to significant recruitment efforts. Though Rabbi Goldberg humbly dismisses those efforts as common in the Conservative movement, he concedes, “We’re better at it than some.” He recognizes that “synagogues are defined by the culture of the people who are engaged,” and for that reason, he has made concerted efforts to bring people into the community who are “particularly passionate” about Jewish life. Cantor Jacob Levy, who has been at KBI for 25 years, notes that the congregation maintains a “critical mass” of people committed to Jewish life today because there are “interested families who were already interested—already committed *davenners* (pray-ers), committed Jews in their homes—who moved into the community.”

KBI calls itself a “right-wing, traditional” Conservative synagogue. It is affiliated with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, has mixed seating for tefillah, and counts both men and women in a *minyan*. It seems
to me that KBI’s self-described “right-wing, traditional” nomenclature refers primarily to decisions regarding tefillah: the community insists on a “complete davenning” with a “full Musaf and Kedushah” and a “complete annual Torah reading,” unlike many other Conservative congregations. KBI chooses not to use the Sim Shalom prayerbook as their primary siddur (which is used by most Conservative congregations today); instead they use The Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook (Silverman, 1946), which is used in Conservative congregations for those who want a more “complete” liturgy than Sim Shalom offers. It is interesting to note that when I asked Cantor Levy about the things that make tefillah successful at KBI, he responded,

It is the fact that we haven’t compromised our main minyanim (services). This is a congregation where, if it’s in the prayer-book, we say it. We haven’t started with a triennial Torah reading, we haven’t cut out repetitions of the Amidah. The davenning is traditional, and that’s what draws traditional people, people who want a traditional Conservative congregation. People say, “Oh, this is what I was looking for!” . . . Shabbos morning is successful because we haven’t cut things that are traditional about it.

Shabbat at KBI

The hallmark of KBI is its vibrant Shabbat culture. While I was studying KBI, its regular building was under construction and I was unable to witness their “usual” Shabbat scene. However, everyone I met specifically mentioned the experience of Shabbat at KBI, taking great pride in the Shabbat community that comes together every week for study, prayer, and socializing. On a regular Shabbat in their own building, KBI provides many different entry points for engagement. As I noted earlier, approximately 400 adults come to Shabbat morning worship on a weekly basis, along with a significant number of children. In addition to the main service, which typically runs from 9:00 a.m.–12:15 p.m., KBI offers a significant array of other Shabbat “addresses” (as Rabbi Goldberg calls them) throughout the morning: Torah Portion Study Group, Adult Learners’ class, Adult Learners’ Minyan, Torah Reading Chug (grades 4–7), Torah for Tots (infants through pre-K, with

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4Many Conservative congregations have adopted a “triennial” cycle of Torah reading, which means that they read one third of each Torah portion per week (for example, the first third of all Torah portions in year 1, the second third of all Torah portions in year 2, and the last third of all Torah portions in year 3). It therefore takes 3 years to read through the entire Torah in a congregation that has adopted the triennial cycle. By contrast, KBI reads the entire Torah portion every week, in order to complete a full reading of the Torah every year.

5As explained to me by both the educator and cantor.

6The number of adult worshippers at Shabbat services remains that high almost every week of the year, even on weeks without life-cycle events such as b’nai mitzvah or baby namings.
their parents and/or grandparents), Mini Minyan (K–grade 1), Mini Congo (grades 2–3), Junior Congregation (grades 4–5), Kadima (grades 6–7), and Teen Shmooze (post-b’nai mitzvah and up).

Most of these “addresses” are available every single week of the year—rain or shine, holiday or no holiday, every single season. On top of that, there are family education programs on Shabbat morning 16 times during the year, and the synagogue offers a variety of activities through the national “Synaplex” program once a month. Around 12:15 p.m., directly following all of the morning activities, there is a community-wide Kiddush luncheon, sponsored by the synagogue. As Educator Linda Kohn reminded me, “it’s a significant expense for the congregation, but it is part of the budget of Shabbat programming for the community” because the leadership sees it as a crucial part of building a strong Shabbat-oriented culture.

It seems to me that the Shabbat offerings at KBI are both more varied and more consistent than in most North American synagogues. They are more varied in that there are at least three or four options for adults every single week, and there are at least four or five options for children as well. They are more consistent in that they take place every single week of the year. Many congregations offer “Junior Congregation” or “Tot Shabbat” on a monthly basis, but it is rare to find a synagogue with so many options every single week. I think it is worth including Rabbi Goldberg’s comments regarding the Shabbat morning experience at KBI:

We have a substantial sit down Kiddush luncheon every week, which really enforces the sense of chevre, and is a real incentive to come with your kids. The kids are in their programs, and the adults are in their programs, and everyone comes together for meals and activities. Some people stay all day!

. . . We created a socialization pattern into prayer. There are people who can be, you know, Avraham Avinu or Sarah Imenu (our father Abraham or our mother Sarah), the lonely person of faith. They can come by themselves, pray to God, and leave. [But] that’s not most people. Most people need to feel part of something. And that’s why having this large Kiddush luncheon socialization, and stuff going on at all ages and stages every week, is really important. We have worked hard to provide comfortable children’s addresses on Shabbat, and a variety of adult paths [too].

Shabbat is the highlight of the Jewish week; it is also clearly the highlight of Jewish life at Kehillat Beth Israel. It is the time when a large percentage of the congregation comes together for prayer, learning, celebration, and community.

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7See a description of Synaplex in the section “Tefillah at Temple Sinai.”
Tefillah Education at KBI

Tefillah education for youth at Kehillat Beth Israel emphasizes behavior: students learn the keva (structure, format, words) of Jewish prayer, developing the proficiency to daven with the community. While the rabbi, cantor, and educator all recognize the importance of believing (i.e., kavanna, intention, understanding the meaning of prayers) and belonging (being part of a community), it is clear that the educational system is designed to enhance students’ abilities to daven and serve as sblichei tzibbur (prayer leaders) in traditional Jewish settings. Linda explains that the overall goal at KBI is for students “to feel comfortable and confident” in Jewish prayer settings; however, she believes that this goal must be reached through the use of “multiple impacts, not only [in] our setting.” As a result, KBI tries to push programs such as Jewish camping, youth group participation, and high school in Israel, emphasizing that synagogue worship “can’t be the only experience” if children are to reach “our prayer goals.” Since the overall goals of comfort in and confidence with tefillah cannot be achieved through religious school alone, Linda and the rest of the KBI leadership has decided to focus its congregational tefillah education primarily on behavior—on developing Hebrew skills, learning prayers, and being able to participate in and lead traditional davenning.

At KBI, tefillah is viewed within the framework of halachah (Jewish law). When I asked Cantor Levy about the role of tefillah in the congregation, he stared at me speechless. “The role?” he asked. “Yeah . . . what is tefillah for the congregation?” [Silence] I continued, “Let me make it even more broad, if that will help . . . tell me about tefillah at your congregation.” [Long pause] “Well . . . tefillah is something we are commanded to do.” For Cantor Levy, indeed for the whole educational system at KBI, Jews engage in tefillah because they are commanded to do so. As a result, Cantor Levy says, “we want to have as many people davenning to God, as knowledgeably, and as fervently as they can.” The cantor recognizes that “trying to engender kavanna is complicated”; therefore “with children, [tefillah education] is mostly aimed at ‘here are the phonics of what you want to get out of your mouth’ ” along with a little bit of “the broader concepts behind that.”

Rabbi Goldberg echoes Cantor Levy by describing the goals of tefillah education as connected to behavior—learning how to daven and how to lead traditional davenning:

The goal would be, depending on the individual case, (a) Hebrew phonics—immersion in Hebrew phonics; (b) mastery of certain basic prayers . . . everybody should have that, it’s baseline for bar/bat mitzvah if they’re going to lead; (c) if you are motivated, and you’re coming to a variety of prayer services, then you will gain additional fluency, additional comfort level, additional interest in learning to lead.
It is worth noting that (unlike at Temple Sinai) neither the rabbi nor the cantor is especially concerned with making prayer a meaningful, spiritual experience. They do not claim that the goals of tefillah education are primarily affective; they accurately describe tefillah education at KBI as the process of teaching students how to lead and follow traditional davenning—a task the synagogue accomplishes exceedingly well.

There are a wide variety of educational “tracks” for children at KBI, all of which include tefillah. A large number of KBI families send their children to Jewish day school—either the Solomon Schechter (i.e., Conservative) day school or the local Orthodox day school—and the synagogue acknowledges that the educational needs of day school students are different than the needs of religious school students. Day school students do not usually attend “religious school” classes, but many of them regularly attend the various Shabbat programs for children and families. It is interesting to note that professionals at KBI do not typically refer to students in the congregation as “day school kids” or “religious school kids” (as Jewish educators often do); rather, they refer to people as “Shabbos regulars” and “not Shabbos regulars” (keeping in mind that “Shabbos regulars” include both day school families and religious school families). This classification reflects the extent to which Shabbat observance and Shabbat participation is ingrained in the community—much more so than in many other non-Orthodox synagogues.

Tefillah is a component of every single educational program at KBI. Tefillah begins with “kids who are in utero” at Torah for Tots on Shabbat mornings (for parents and children ages 0–5). As Cantor Levy’s wife and longtime teacher Gail Levy remarks, “It’s great when they come out [of the womb] singing tefillah!” As children grow, there are additional opportunities for tefillah education. Linda leads tefillah with the nursery school kids on Friday mornings, and religious school classes always begin with tefillah—shachrit on Sunday mornings and mincha on weekday afternoons. Shabbat School sessions include “family services” (separate from the main service and the various children’s minyanim), and as Linda explained to me, students at NOAM (a program for day school and religious school students in grades 3–8 which is run by KBI teens) “daven mincha with a full Torah reading, the whole big deal.”

Linda acknowledges that KBI educates for tefillah through “rote learning, not [through] the emotional piece of the tefillot.” The children start by learning prayers through hearing them and memorizing them aurally. Eventually they learn to read the Hebrew, correcting any words or phrases they may have heard (and perhaps memorized) incorrectly. (It is worth noting that KBI tracks its students in Hebrew classes according to their Hebrew skills, beginning in fourth or fifth grade.)

I personally witnessed a fifth grade religious school mincha service that demonstrated the level of prayer competency of the students at KBI.
The teacher called out, “Who wants to lead?” and five students rushed to the front of the room. The students serving as slichet tzibbur (service leaders) faced the ark at the front of the room and proceeded to lead a full, traditional mincha service for the entire fifth grade. As soon as the prayers began, every single child joined along out loud or sat quietly. Most of the students knew the words to most of the prayers, including Ashrei (Psalm 145), of which Linda says, “We break our teeth with [that prayer]!” Ashrei is a notoriously difficult prayer to teach children, since it is quite long (24 verses) and it is written in the poetic language of psalms, which means the Hebrew can be challenging to master. It is possible, of course, that the students in this class were on their best behavior due to a visitor sitting in the back of the room. But there is no denying the fact that the fifth graders were tremendously comfortable with weekday mincha liturgy. Linda mentioned that the fifth graders “can do a full mincha very comfortably, and by the time we get to bay [seventh grade], the goal is for them to do ma’ariv, some of shachrit, and be able to lead.” I have to admit that I did not fully believe her until I saw the fifth graders davenning with my own eyes.

Despite making a conscious decision to focus KBI’s tefillah education on keva and rote learning, Linda wonders whether that has been the best route to take. She understands the benefits of her decision (students do indeed develop strong davenning skills), but she acknowledges the price as well: students may not feel as connected to prayer as she would prefer—“Where do the emotions and feelings get involved? That’s something we’re trying to figure out.” Linda worries that students who have a hard time with Hebrew or singing may never be able to connect with prayer in a deep way:

There are people who will never be proficient in the Hebrew language. Should prayer be cut off to them? That’s where I’m really struggling. There are kids that are not singers. . . . So does that mean that prayer is not accessible to them? Is there another venue? Like, is art more a venue, or is dance more of a venue? And what happens with a disabled child, or a child who will never be able to learn the Hebrew? You’re cut off from the prayer experience? I’m struggling with it because in the Conservative movement, at least, rote learning is . . . it’s very important for them to . . . feel comfortable in every single setting of tefillah. But yet, [some students] are uncomfortable.

KBI has been enormously successful in getting its students to feel comfortable with traditional davenning, but its leaders nevertheless question whether they are doing what’s best for all the students in focusing on the keva of prayer.
INCENTIVE PROGRAMS: SKILLS-BASED COMPETENCY

Since the goal of tefillah education at KBI is skills-based competency, the congregation has created a number of incentive programs to encourage students to build their prayer skills. As Linda explained:

We have what we call the “Sh’ma/V’ahavta Club,” the “Kiddush Club,” and the “Shatz Club.” They are all incentive programs. Around this time of year, we send a letter home to third to sixth graders saying that... if you read the Sh’ma/V’ahavta, you sing the Sh’ma/V’ahavta, and then you do it by heart, you become part of the “Sh’ma/V’ahavta Club.” And then at the end of the year when we have the Zimriya [year-end song session and celebration] they get a major prize—they don’t get a little prize, they get a major prize! —a book prize, something like that. For the “Kiddush Club” they get a Kiddush cup. They have to do Friday night Kiddush—the full Kiddush... they have to do it four times for their families, get signed off on it, do it for me, I sign off on it, and they get a Kiddush cup at the end of the year [at the Zimriya]. And then the “Shatz Club” is being a shaliach tzibbur [prayer leader] for all of shachrit, well, an abbreviated shachrit. ... They get a tape from me, they learn it on their own, and then they lead the Shabbat service... at a Shabbat School program. The parents come, it’s a big deal. ... They get a major gift, a major thing at the Zimriya, it’s really nice. We have a couple of kids who have done the Shatz Club. It’s an incentive program, so it’s not a large [number of kids who do it].

With these incentive programs, KBI’s leadership keeps its eye on the prize: they know their goals in tefillah education (i.e., competency in davening), and they have built an educational system that revolves around those goals. The incentive programs give students the opportunity to shine in an area that the synagogue clearly values (prayer skills). In many synagogue schools the only “carrot” (i.e., reward) for students to work toward is success on the day of one’s bar/bat mitzvah. KBI demonstrates that it is possible to develop additional ways to reward student achievement. Moreover, the incentive programs are successful because they honor students’ accomplishments in the public eye. Whether it is through seeing one’s name listed under “Sh’ma/V’ahavta Club” on the school bulletin board or receiving a Kiddush cup at the school’s end-of-year Zimriya, students learn that their achievements matter to the whole synagogue community.

TORAH CHUG

Another way that KBI pursues its goal of skills-based competency in tefillah is through “Torah Chug,” a unique and highly successful program designed
to teach pre-b’nai mitzvah students to chant Torah if/when they so desire. Veteran Torah Chug teacher Gail Levy explains how the program works:

Twice a month on Shabbat from 10:15–11:00, for the fourth to sixth grades, there’s a Torah reading club. So they’ll learn, you know, six to nine p’sukim (verses), and then they will read Torah here in Junior Congregation. Or they can read Torah in the afternoons at the NOAM program. We’ve had years of major success with it. So they learn it on a Shabbat morning, and it used to be that we wanted them to do it the following week. But that was insane [to have Junior Congregation reading Torah every week]. So now, I think it’s every 3rd week. They get [their assigned verses], they practice, the next time they practice, and then they read. Some of them love to do it; they get very excited. It’s great because you learn it, you master it, and you see [the results].

We teach Torah trope, so you learn the trope for that day, you practice it, you do it from the Torah, and within a few weeks, you’ve seen the success!

Torah Chug has been very successful at KBI, and as far as I know, few other congregations have tried similar programs.

From my perspective, this program is successful because of what some management consultants call “short-term wins,” or what Synagogue 2000 called “low-hanging fruit” (Hoffman 2006, p. 113). Whatever name it is given, it is the ability of an organization to create small “victories” that motivate people or institutions that are in the midst of a long journey. The individual’s journey through Jewish education may last a few years or (hopefully) a lifetime, and it is important for educators to help students reach benchmarks of success along the way. For many children enrolled in today’s congregational schools, the only “win” in their religious education is the bar/bat mitzvah. At KBI, Torah Chug provides another significant way for students to feel that they have achieved something important along their educational journey—and like the incentive programs, achievement is recognized in the public arena.

Closing Thoughts

According to Rabbinic tradition, habituation and acculturation are essential components for successful tefillah education if the goal of tefillah education is behavioral (developing children’s capacity to participate in a prayer service). Habituation and acculturation to prayer are both readily apparent at KBI. Because children daven a full service every single time they show up to synagogue, they become habituated to traditional davening. In addition,

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8See “Chinuch,” col. 161 in the Encyclopedia Talmudit (Bar-Ilan & Zavin, 1982).
many students in the religious school attend Shabbat morning services on a regular basis, thereby building a habit out of going to synagogue.

Acculturation to communal worship is also a significant component of education at KBI. Although there are a large number of minyanim and other activities for youth on Shabbat mornings, everyone comes together for the last 15 to 20 minutes of the “main” service. As a result, children eventually feel comfortable with the culture of KBI’s adult service. Rabbi Goldberg highlights the importance of including children in congregational worship:

[There are] people who worship the god of decorum, who think that children make too much noise. But my view is that if you hear children making noise, those children have a good shot at growing up with comfort in tefillah. If you guarantee that they can’t step foot in the building until after bar mitzvah, you also guarantee that they will never step foot in the building.

When children enter the “main” service on Shabbat mornings—when the children’s minyanim end—those in Kindergarten through third grade run up to the readers’ table to help lead Aleinu, Adon Olam, and Ein Keloheinu (and are rewarded for their efforts with lollipops). KBI not only invites children into “adult” davenning, but they also make the children feel that their presence matters.

As the congregational educator, Linda continues to question whether and how to bring in the emotional/affective/spiritual elements of prayer into tefillah education (i.e., kavanna), but at the same time she is proud of the congregation’s successes in the realm of education for keva. It is challenging to educate for both keva and kavanna with the limited time available in Jewish supplementary education, and KBI has made its choice to focus on keva very clear.

**BELONGING: TEFILLAH EDUCATION AT BAYSIDE RECONSTRUCTIONIST SYNAGOGUE**

Bayside Reconstructionist Synagogue: An Overview

Bayside Reconstructionist Synagogue (BRS) is a Reconstructionist congregation in the suburbs of a large city in the Eastern United States. With 350 family units it might be considered a “small” synagogue, but it is actually

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9Since the Middle Ages Jews have used sweets for educational aims (thereby encouraging students to perceive Jewish education as “sweet” and enjoyable). In line with this custom, KBI gives sweets (such as lollipops and chocolate kisses) to children in the special children’s minyanim on Shabbat mornings. See *Rituals of Childhood* (Marcus, 1996) for more details about the medieval custom of using sweets in Jewish education.
quite large for the Reconstructionist movement. Rabbi Ken Silverman has been the rabbi at BRS for almost 20 years, and he explains that the congregation began 50 years ago as a study group who wanted to talk about the work of Mordecai Kaplan and others:

They met in people's basements... I guess in about the 3rd year, someone said, “You know, it wouldn't kill us to daven Shachrit [a morning service]. If we daven, then we don't have to go back to the synagogue which we all hate.”

The [group] never had a really strong thrust for tefillah. I mean, they were more into the study experience, and they were very interested in music. The founders were very concerned about cultural expression and the like. So they saw tefillah as an opportunity to come together to sing together.

Over time, BRS has changed considerably. The congregation has weekly Shabbat services on Friday night, and tefillah has become more central to the life of the congregation. Rabbi Ken (as everyone calls him) describes the change in this way:

The congregation grew and people’s needs were different... They were coming to get an education for their kids, and whatever happened to them, that was very nice, but that was coincidental. It’s so unlike the founders, who really didn't give too much consideration to the education of their children; they wanted adult education.

Despite these changes, the synagogue’s connections to Reconstructionist ideology are still prominent today. The congregational brochure features the following quotation from Mordecai M. Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism: “Judaism cannot be perpetuated merely by nostalgia for the past. The conditions which enabled Judaism to flourish in the past are irrevocably gone with the wind. Nothing less than original and creative thinking in terms of present day realities and future possibilities can create anew the conditions which are indispensable to Jewish survival.”

Kaplan was well-known for his theology which emphasized people-hood at the center of Judaism as opposed to God or Torah. In his magnum opus *Judaism as a Civilization* (1981), Kaplan defined Judaism as the civilization of the Jewish people, and he championed Jewish “folkways.” Religion is but one component of the Jewish civilization; art, language, music, dance, food, land, and literature are all important components as well (Borowitz 1994, p. 10). For Kaplan, prayer mattered, and he argued that public worship is an important way to “feel at home in the world” (Kaplan, 1994, p. 246). That being said, for Kaplan, prayer is just one facet of many in Jewish life.
In the tradition of Ira Eisenstein (Kaplan’s disciple and son-in-law), who maintained that it is “only by converting a house of prayer into a house of study [that] interest in synagogue life [can] be rekindled” (Caplan 2002, p. 165), study has been emphasized more than prayer at BRS. For Cantor Tyler Roseland, who was invested as a cantor in the Reform Movement, it has taken some time to adjust to a congregation where tefillah has not always played a central role:

...I’ll be honest. It’s been somewhat frustrating for me, as someone for whom tefillah is very important. It’s often de-emphasized [here]. [Rabbi] Ken has commented on numerous occasions that this is not a praying congregation. Sometimes that underlines that we’re trying to make it into one, at least partially one. It’s tough in our setting, I think, because of our congregation’s history...a place focusing on education, community, study.

Indeed, Rabbi Ken himself is not particularly interested in or moved by traditional Jewish prayer:

[When I came to BRS] I was interested in talking about prayer. I was interested in expanding the repertoire, increasing poetry and literature...and I was very interested in communal singing. I’m not seriously into the spiritual nature of the prayer experience. [My spirituality comes from] art. I’m very interested in art, music, literature.

When I asked Rabbi Ken to describe prayer at BRS, he said that during a typical Friday night (Erev Shabbat) service, “there’s important music, there’s some great literature, there’s very good discussion, and...the possibility of experiencing a moment or two of transcendence.” It is worth noting that the Erev Shabbat service at BRS features a long sermon/discussion that can last up to 45 minutes, much longer than one would find at most other North American congregations today.

Kaplan’s influence on BRS—not only on Rabbi Ken—is readily apparent in the realm of tefillah. Kaplan was a pioneer in the use of supplementary readings for prayer, in order to infuse prayer with “new life”; in fact, his “first published works of liturgy were collections of readings...to be used within the context of a prayer service in order to vary its content, to express current spiritual concerns and values, and to translate ancient concerns into modern idiom” (Caplan 2002, p. 47). Not surprisingly, then, one of the ways that BRS encourages creativity in worship is through the use of prayer supplements (including poetry, art, and readings in English) which Rabbi Ken creates for Friday night services and b’nai mitzvah families create for Saturday morning services.
Tefillah Education at BRS

Though neither tefillah nor youth education were particularly important to the founders of BRS, both have become more important to the community over time. Tefillah education is now a significant component of the synagogue school experience at BRS. Rabbi Suzie Dobbs, the rabbi/educator at BRS, explains: “[I think] it is a natural progression in a Jewish community to go from study to prayer . . . the vision of the school is to create Jewish identity, so tefillah is a part of that whole experience.” There are three educational programs for youth and families at BRS today. The programs include tefillah in different ways, but the emphasis of tefillah in all three programs is clearly on community-building more than anything else.

Belonging: being part of the community

Although the clergy and teachers of BRS would like their students to learn basic Hebrew reading skills, know certain key prayers, understand the structure/rubric of a prayer service, and feel something positive and/or spiritual with regard to tefillah (as is the case at many synagogues), one of their primary goals is to teach children how to function in community for prayer—how to sit still during tefillah, how to behave in the sanctuary space, how to treat others in the community, and how to feel connected to the larger congregation. I was surprised to find that every single person I met at BRS (including professionals and congregants) articulated the importance of creating a sense of belonging as an essential goal of tefillah education.

BRS fosters community through tefillah in a wide variety of ways. First, the older kids are responsible for handing out and collecting prayer books. Rabbi Suzie points out that it “fosters growth and responsibility” in the older kids, and it also “models future involvement as ushers.” In addition, kids always sit in the same sections, based on their age/grade, so they begin to build an understanding of sacred space and sacred time. Another means of fostering a sense of community is through a “kaddish board” and an “Israel board.” For the Kaddish board, one of the teen teaching assistants puts together a board with names on the synagogue’s yahrtzeit list each week, and Rabbi Suzie reads the names during the school’s tefillah. If a child knows someone on the list or is related to him/her, the child is invited to say something about that person. If it was a congregant that the kids did not know, then Rabbi Suzie says something about him/her. As a result, the students in the school feel more connected to the larger BRS community. The Israel board (which is also put together by a teen teaching assistant) contains two or three interesting facts about Israel, including the weather...
Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Tefillah Education

in Israel that day. Before the recitation of Aleinu, Rabbi Suzie does the following:

I talk about how we are connected to each other as well as Jews all over the world and in Israel. We are all real people, experiencing real things. I then give a 1-minute sound bite about the weather and events in Israel. The board remains in the entrance of the school for the kids and parents to look at. . . . By doing this before Aleinu, it is a reminder that it is up to each of *[the students]* to make these connections.

One more example of fostering community through tefillah can be found during the birchot ha’shachar (morning blessings) section of tefillah. Rabbi Suzie invites students to share sacred events with the rest of the community—anything happy, sad, or otherwise that the students want to share. The community responds with “Baruch hu” or “Baruch sh’mo” as an acknowledgment to the student who spoke.

According to Rabbi Suzie, the effort to teach kids how to behave in community has yielded strong results so far:

Over the course of the year, we really see unbelievable growth. Before we had done tefillah education the way we do it currently, whenever [students] came into the sanctuary for a program, they never knew where to sit, they didn’t understand how to hold themselves, didn’t understand how to be a group. And now whenever we have [communal] programming . . . they’re able to function as a group. They’re able to understand how to be together in a space. So that’s . . . it’s not necessarily tefillah-based, but it’s a result of their tefillah experience. And to me, that’s a very important thing.

Like the educators at Temple Sinai and KBI, Rabbi Suzie is acutely aware of the time limitations she faces, and she recognizes the imperative of making choices about her educational aims. Along with Rabbi Ken, Cantor Tyler, and the education committee, Rabbi Suzie made the decision that tefillah education ought to engender a sense of belonging—even if that means the school spends less time working toward the goals of believing and behaving. BRS has been successful at developing a sense of community in the school through the use of tefillah, even though their students may be less well versed in the *keva* of prayer and less able to articulate their beliefs and feelings about prayer than students in other synagogues around the country.

**The importance of community: a strict attendance policy**

Building community is not only a stated goal of the BRS synagogue school programs, but it is also enacted through a strict attendance policy. Though
exceptions are made from time to time, students are required to attend synagogue school from second through seventh grade. The school’s handbook describes the Six-Year Residency Policy in this way:

The goals of the BRS synagogue school are to impart to our children not only the Hebrew language, prayer, and Jewish culture and history, but to instill an appreciation for Jewish life and values. As a Reconstructionist congregation, we seek to create a cohesive caring community within our school as well as in the congregation. To achieve this goal, which our congregation deems to be of great importance, the synagogue school has a six-year residency requirement for attendance . . . [details] . . . Exceptions will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. However, it is the belief of the synagogue community that it is disruptive to community building as well as the Reconstructionist principles to allow exceptions to the six-year residency requirement.

Of course, the school encourages students to attend school from kindergarten through their teen years, but 6 years is the minimum. The strict attendance policy at BRS does not only apply to the number of years the student attends school (the “residency requirement”); the school also maintains a strict attendance policy per year. Students may miss no more than 25% of their classes, or else they will be moved back one grade:

Rabbi Suzie: We say that belonging to the community and being a part of services and being a part of class is an important thing. We have an attendance requirement that we actually [stick to]. . . I won’t give out work if a kid is absent or if a kid is sick; I won’t let them “make it up” by giving out work. They have to be there.

Nicki: So what do they do (if they’re absent)?

Rabbi Suzie: They’re not absent. It hasn’t happened because parents aren’t going to let that happen. What happens is that they get put back in the year below. And the language is, “You haven’t met your communal obligation. Your bar/bat mitzvah date, if you have one, gets put into the year below because you now have to become part of this next community.

From my experiences attending and teaching in synagogue schools, strict attendance policies are rare. It seems from my observations that the strict attendance policy at BRS does lend itself well to building a stronger sense of community—an important goal for everyone in the congregation.

Closing Thoughts

Tefillah education at BRS is highly successful for building community and creating a sense of belonging—the goals most strongly articulated by the
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leaders of the congregation (both lay and professional). Compared with students at other synagogues, BRS students focus less on rote memorization of prayers (the keva) or on ideas and feelings about prayer (the kavanna) and more on building community. BRS is an excellent example of how a synagogue whose culture is not particularly focused on prayer can nevertheless succeed at tefillah education, when “success” is defined more narrowly, in this case as the ability of a synagogue to build community and develop a strong sense of belonging among its congregants.

COMMON THREADS: AREAS OF CONVERGENCE IN TEFILLAH EDUCATION

For all their differences, the three congregations I studied have many areas of convergence, including common strengths and similar challenges.

Common Strengths

INTENTIONALITY AND REALISTIC GOALS

There are many synagogues in North America with educational systems that seem to run on autopilot. Although Jewish educators have the best of intentions, it is nevertheless the case that many of us keep religious schools running more or less the same year after year, adding a program here or there based on what’s “hot” at the moment rather than on a cohesive vision of Jewish education. As Wertheimer (2009) explains, “by their own admission, many (Jewish supplementary) schools are most interested in giving students positive Jewish experiences, but they also devote time to teaching skills and content without a clear sense of the ends they wish to achieve” (p. 7). Tefillah education is particularly vulnerable in this regard: it tends to include a mishmash of various curricula, programs, and worship services all geared toward some vague, unspecified goal of “learning Jewish prayer.”

In stark contrast, all three synagogues I studied were exceedingly intentional in the way they do tefillah education. Educators at Temple Sinai made the conscious choice that engendering kavanna and developing a prayerful environment in the school ought to take precedence over training for proficiency in keva. The decision at Kehillat Beth Israel was just the opposite: KBI operates in a halakhic mode whereby one’s feelings about prayer are far less important than one’s ability to participate in and lead traditional davenning; therefore the education system is designed to improve students’ davenning skills. Taking yet another path, Bayside Reconstructionist Synagogue pursues community-building as its agreed-upon goal of tefillah education.
In each synagogue there is a clear educational vision, and tefillah education serves as one important component of the vision. In Jack Wertheimer’s 2009 report, *Schools That Work: What We Can Learn From Good Jewish Supplementary Schools*, he notes that “effective schools define a vision of their ideal graduate and the means they will develop to produce such students” and that “good schools strive to align all their components with their stated goals” (p. 5, 13). This is certainly the case in the three schools I studied. In each congregation, the educators, clergy, and lay leaders realize that in the minimal time allotted to supplementary Jewish education, it is impossible to do everything. As a result, they make important decisions about where to focus their time, energy, and resources, and then work hard to align the synagogue’s educational system with its clearly defined goals. Each congregation I studied has deliberately chosen one area of tefillah education to pursue, recognizing both the prize and price that come along with that decision.

**COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP**

One of the most obvious areas in which all three synagogues excel is in the realm of leadership. Through collaboration, empowerment, and longevity, the professionals at each synagogue have created outstanding models of tefillah education for the 21st century.

There is widespread evidence that collaborative leadership is highly effective for all kinds of organizations, including synagogues (Aron 2002, for example). One of the things that makes Sinai, KBI, and BRS successful is that they have strong visionary professionals who exercise leadership by collaborating with others to set the tone and shape the goals of tefillah education. While the extent to which lay leaders participate in educational decision-making varies significantly from synagogue to synagogue, there is evidence in all three congregations of strong collaboration among the Jewish professionals. It became apparent to me that, by and large, the rabbi(s), cantor, and educator(s) in each congregation support one another, trust one another, share an educational vision, and truly value and take into consideration one another’s points of view. That is not to say there are no disagreements or problems among the professional staff; rather, the clergy and educators have, for the most part, committed themselves to working through conflicts in a collaborative manner for the benefit of their community.

If one hallmark of excellence in Jewish education is “linking the silos” (i.e., lowering the barriers between different “silos” of the synagogue, see Wertheimer, 2005), then all three synagogues have indeed achieved excellence. While the synagogues do remain silo-ed to some extent—with certain professionals taking the lead over certain “silos” of the congregation such as education or worship—the professionals at Sinai, KBI, and BRS have worked hard to lower the barriers between those silos.
Exercising collaborative leadership and “linking the silos” are especially important tasks in the realm of tefillah education. Tefillah education inherently lies at the nexus of at least two congregational “silos”—education and worship. In many synagogues, an educator oversees congregational education while the rabbi(s) and cantor(s) oversee congregational worship. All too often there is a significant disconnect between what happens in the educational “silo” and what happens in the worship “silo,” a situation that inevitably leads to fractured and ineffective tefillah education. Sinai, KBI, and BRS serve as important models for other congregations in the realm of tefillah education because they have successfully linked worship and education.

One of the most important ways for synagogues to “link the silos” between education and worship is to empower the educator(s). While collaboration among leaders of any organization is often the key to success, true collaboration works best when all players enter the relationship on an equal footing. Unfortunately, the reality is that in most synagogues the rabbi(s) and cantor have much more power and status than the educator(s). Yet in the three synagogues I studied, the educator was—without exception—elevated to equal status, and had just as much power, as the rabbi(s) and cantor.

While empowering the educator is a very important step toward improving tefillah education, increasing the longevity of rabbis, cantors, and educators’ tenure at the synagogue is also important. There are often very good reasons why Jewish professionals leave synagogues after short periods of time; that being said, one of the best ways to improve tefillah education is to put together a team of professionals who respect each other, work well with one another, and remain together for a significant length of time. It takes a long time for leadership teams to work out their differences, create a shared vision, and then implement that vision. The simple fact is that change takes time. Although it is possible to succeed in Jewish education (and, by extension, tefillah education) with leadership teams that have been in place for a shorter period of time, it seems that the longer the rabbi, cantor, and educator work together (if the team is collaborative and supportive of one another), the more effective they can be.

Excellence in teaching

It goes without saying that strong tefillah education depends on strong teachers. A synagogue may boast a wonderful vision for tefillah education, and the rabbi, cantor, and educator may exhibit outstanding collaborative leadership skills, but teachers are really the key to successful education. All of the educators I met spoke about the need for (and the challenge of) finding and training teachers who can excel in the realm of tefillah education.
In the course of my research I found that strong tefillah education requires teachers who buy in to the congregation’s goals. While some people might be skeptical about the practice of hiring congregants as religious school teachers, all three synagogues I studied had a teaching staff with a high percentage of congregants, in part because it was clear that teachers who are also congregants support the synagogue’s educational goals. When I interviewed teachers at each synagogue it was obvious that they knew the primary goals of tefillah education in the congregation and believed in those goals. There were exceptions, of course, but most teachers articulated the same goals for tefillah education that their rabbi(s), cantor, and educator(s) did.

Another important piece of the puzzle is professional development opportunities for teachers. Many synagogue teachers feel personally uncomfortable with tefillah; consequently, it is hard for them to teach tefillah and/or lead tefillah for their students. Like many Jewish adults in the present era, these teachers never experienced strong tefillah education when they were growing up, and they feel nervous and/or incompetent in Jewish prayer today. Some teachers may be able to work with their students on Hebrew reading skills, and they may be able to sit quietly during the school’s weekly services. Nevertheless, if teachers feel uncomfortable with tefillah, students easily pick up on their unease.

All of the educators I interviewed expressed a desire for their teachers to feel more comfortable with tefillah than they currently do. All three synagogues offer professional development opportunities for their teachers, and there is always a tefillah component to their staff training sessions. However, there is an ongoing and community-wide need for more and better training for teachers in the realm of tefillah education. In a paper presented for the Network for Research in Jewish Education, Saul Wachs and Michael Schatz (2009) described an intervention they conducted to “facilitate change in the culture of prayer and education for prayer in a non-Orthodox day school” (p. 1). In the report, they point out that “as teachers understand and relate to tefillah on a personal level, their teaching is significantly enhanced and thus the students have an experience that is much richer” (p. 19).

Synagogues have very specific needs when it comes to what teachers should know, feel, and be able to do in the realm of tefillah. At KBI, where the educational goal is competency in traditional davening, it is essential for teachers to feel comfortable with traditional davening. At Temple Sinai, on the other hand, where the goal of tefillah education is focused more on belief than on behavior, it is not surprising that the teachers feel very comfortable talking about God and spirituality, but feel much less comfortable with the mechanics of prayer. Each synagogue must tailor its professional development offerings to what is most critical for teachers in that setting.
CONSISTENCY

In every congregation I studied there was significant consistency in the use of sources and special gimmicks for teaching tefillah. At BRS, for example, the congregation uses the same siddur for all of the child/family services in the congregation (including religious school): Siddur Kol Ha’Noar (Sasso & Schein, 2005), an illustrated children’s siddur published by the Reconstructionist Press. Cantor Tyler explains the conscious choice he and Rabbi Suzie made to use the same customs and lead services in the same way for all services at the congregation:

We want them to be acculturated (sic) to what happens in a service. When we do the priestly blessing, the way we do it in any of our services, we have them put their arms around each other and we sort of bless each other, since we’re so non-hierarchical and it’s not about the priests blessing us. So we do that, the same way we would in an adult service, even though it means they’re all over each other and swaying and rocking and pushing each other. But, you know, it’s still part of the experience, even if they’re not at the maturity level yet.

At KBI, Linda works hard to be consistent in her tefillah education methods:

(With the pre-schoolers) I do prayers and use [certain gimmicks including silly songs, melodies, and hand motions] that I know they will [encounter] when they’re with us in Kindergarten, first, second, and third grade. So it’s consistent, and they can expect it. So if I’m doing my “halleluya” (with special hand motions), then they know that in the third grade, they’ll be doing “halleluya” (same hand motions) too.

Common Challenges

While the congregations I studied have a number of similar strengths when it comes to tefillah education, they also have a number of common challenges.

TIME

Lack of time is a major issue for supplementary congregational education in general, and particularly so for tefillah education. Most supplementary Jewish schools have 2 to 4 hours a week available for Jewish education, and tefillah is just one small part of the puzzle (see Wertheimer, 2008 for information about hours of instruction at Jewish supplementary schools in the United States, and see Wertheimer, 2007, p. 6 for the common complaint about the “paucity of hours available for instruction”). Every educator in this study mentioned the lack of time as a major challenge they face with tefillah education.
ADOLESCENT TEFILLAH EDUCATION

Adolescent education is separate from youth education (i.e., pre-b’nai mitzvah) in most Jewish supplementary schools. It is usually “optional” (not required for bar/bat mitzvah), which means there is no carrot-and-stick approach for getting students to attend. Tefillah education for adolescents is almost nonexistent at the three congregations I studied. They do offer educational programs for adolescents, but tefillah plays a very minor role. Typically, tefillah education for adolescents includes planning youth-led High Holy Day services and/or the occasional youth-led Shabbat service. There are very few opportunities for adolescents to grow in any of the three areas of tefillah education I have highlighted throughout this work: believing (What do I believe?; What do the prayers mean?), behaving (How do I do X, Y, and Z?), or belonging (How can I become part of a community through participation in tefillah?). The assumption seems to be (a) that teenagers have already reached maturity in these areas or (b) that teenagers have no interest in learning and growing in these areas. The educators I met mentioned that teenagers are unlikely to attend programs about tefillah that are advertised as such.

One of the ways that all three synagogues have managed to keep teenagers engaged in tefillah throughout their adolescence is through serving as madrichim (assistant teachers) in classes with the younger students. This is one promising avenue for adolescent tefillah education (through the use of mentoring and leadership opportunities), but there is much more to be done to make tefillah education more meaningful in the teen years.

HEBREW LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

One of the primary tensions in tefillah education is the balance between educating for tefillah (in general) and helping students with their Hebrew reading skills. There is no doubt that Hebrew learning is fundamental to strong tefillah education (much of Jewish prayer is in Hebrew, after all), but there is still a lingering question of how much emphasis we ought to place on Hebrew. Particularly in congregations where the goal of tefillah education is in the realm of believing or belonging (rather than behavior), it is far less pressing to develop students’ Hebraic skills, and many synagogues might benefit from making the self-conscious choice to spend less time teaching Hebrew phonics.

B’NAI MITZVAH TRAINING VS. TEFILLAH EDUCATION

Closely related to the challenge of balancing tefillah education with Hebrew language acquisition is the tension between tefillah education and bar/bat mitzvah training. It is true that synagogues feel obligated to prepare their
students for b’nei mitzvah services, but I believe they also have the obligation to prepare students for a lifetime of Jewish communal worship. Unfortunately the two goals become obscured in many congregations, where lay and professional leaders begin to confuse b’nai mitzvah training with tefillah education. The two are connected, of course, but they are not one and the same.

Most significantly, the goals for b’nai mitzvah training and tefillah education are quite different. The primary goal for b’nai mitzvah training is for a student to learn specific skills s/he will need for the day s/he becomes bar or bat mitzvah, skills necessary for the life-cycle event itself. A congregation’s primary goal for tefillah education may be believing, behaving, and/or belonging, but whatever the specific goal may be, its ultimate aim is (hopefully) to prepare children for a lifetime of tefillah. As with the challenge posed by Hebrew language acquisition, it is critical to clarify our educational goals and do our best to achieve whatever goals we set for ourselves.

**Teach tefillah during tefillah?**

One of the biggest controversies I encountered during my interviews is the question of whether to teach tefillah during tefillah. By and large it seems that rabbis and educators are in favor of teaching about tefillah during tefillah; they feel it is important to give people landmarks or signs about where they are on the “roadmap” of a prayer service:

Rabbi Stern (Temple Sinai): I tell my conversion students that, before the High Holy Days, they should buy a book like *Entering the High Holy Days* (Hammer 1998); and I say, “Bring it to services. If you see yourself dozing off, read it!” I would be so happy to see them reading it! [It’s helpful] when the *siddur* gives you a ramp to get on the train.

Cantors, on the other hand, tend to believe that tefillah should be left alone, that we should leave the teaching of tefillah to another time and place:

Cantor Tyler (BRS): I love the way [our services] are set up, we do a lot of poetry, which to me works a lot better than *iyunnei tefillah* [short teachings about the prayers]. To me, *iyunnei tefillah* always feel like, I imagine a tribe around a campfire somewhere, doing their dance. And all of a sudden the dance stops and the tribe leader says, “This is the point that represents the rain from the heavens . . .” Gives a 5-minute speech about the logistics of what they’re doing. That just doesn’t happen; it’s not organic. To try and teach about a prayer as you’re doing it . . . if you have a poem or something that works as liturgy itself . . . any teaching we do during the service is *through* the tefillah, not *about* the tefillah. Although we incorporate teaching about tefillah in the synagogue school, when it comes time to pray, it’s time to pray.
I find it fascinating, and entirely appropriate, that rabbis/educators and cantors feel so differently about teaching during tefillah. Cantors are, first and foremost, artists. In cantorial school they train as artists, learning to create beautiful, meaningful worship experiences. Rabbis and educators, on the other hand, do not usually see themselves as artists. They study liturgy and they must learn how to lead worship, but they do not learn liturgy and music from an artistic, performative perspective. Instead, they see themselves as teachers, and therefore, they believe it is perfectly reasonable to teach tefillah during tefillah, whereas cantors find it too disruptive to the experience of prayer.

TEFILLAH EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

From this research, I have found that, despite the challenges, it is possible to succeed at synagogue-based tefillah education for youth in the 21st century, if we are willing to be realistic about and more specific with our goals. We must be clear about how we define “success.” Temple Sinai succeeds in educating its students for belief, Kehillat Beth Israel succeeds in educating its students for behavior, and Bayside Reconstructionist Synagogue succeeds in educating its students for a sense of belonging. Due to time limitations in supplementary Jewish education, it is impossible to do everything; therefore, synagogue leaders must determine their goals—for Jewish education in general, but also for tefillah education in particular.

For hundreds of years Jews have recognized the tensions inherent in educating for the three main dimensions of Jewish life, however one identifies them: God, Torah, Israel; Torah, Avodah, G’milut Chasadim; Believing, Behaving, Belonging. All these areas of Jewish life are essential for the community as a whole, but it is difficult to place equal emphasis on all three in a supplementary school setting. Most synagogues naturally focus more on one area than the others, whether intentionally or not. The congregations I studied did include all three areas of tefillah education in their educational systems, but they weighted the three areas differently and with clear intentionality.

The decision to weigh one area of tefillah education more heavily than the others is best determined by the following question: “In our congregation, what do we see as the purpose of prayer?” If the answer to this question is primarily affective or “spiritual” (“We pray in order to feel a certain way; we pray in order to enhance our connection with God”), it is best to focus the congregation’s tefillah education on belief/kavanna. If the answer is primarily halachic (“We pray because God commanded us to pray in a particular way”), it is best to focus tefillah education on behavior/keva. If the answer is community-based (“We pray to strengthen the community and to connect with each other and the Jewish people”), it is best to focus
tefillah education on belonging. When a synagogue community is honest about how it views prayer, its leaders will be better able to develop a clear vision for tefillah education in its congregational school.

REFERENCES


