

XI
SOME LITURGICAL NOTES FROM
HAVURAT SHALOM

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The liturgical life of an evolving community, insofar as liturgy is allowed flexibility, is a great indicator of the directions of that community's movement and growth. Such is the case on a large scale with the history of Jewish liturgy in America; on a very small scale the same seems to be true in examining the liturgical history of the *Havurat Shalom* community, now in its fourth year. The purpose of this report is to share with some friends news of the religious direction we have been taking, and also to suggest some general and specific approaches to Jewish worship which might be instructive elsewhere.

When *Havurat Shalom* began having regular Shabbat morning services four years ago (Shabbat morning was then and still is our central service), we were very much committed to the idea of "creative worship." That meant, among other things, that each service required careful planning (by a committee of *Haverim*), that specific themes should be explicitly emphasized each week, and that there should be sufficient variety in the service so that we were not oppressed by the repetitious quality of the basic liturgy.

"Creativity" sometimes meant original work on the part of *Haverim*: composition of new prayers, etc. More often, however, it meant a kind of patchwork creativity: finding sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish, which could be added to the liturgy to provoke thought and inspiration. The poetry of Rilke, Eliot, Cummings, and others combined with passages

from Agadah and Hasidut; musical selections (a phonograph was permitted) from as far afield as Beethoven, Stravinsky, and the Incredible String Band became parts of Shabbos.

I do not mean to put this down, though, as will be seen, we have moved in other directions. There were times of positive exhilaration in weaving together elements of our general and Jewish cultures. The String Band's "You Get Brighter Every Day" really *did* make a beautiful *Yotser Or*. Stravinsky did feel right after reading the flood story from the Torah scroll.

The decline of this approach to liturgy in the *Havurah* began toward the latter part of our second year, and is now almost complete. The change came about for both practical and spiritual reasons. First, the practical: It became extremely difficult to produce anything really creative on a week-to-week basis. Even the creativity of choosing readings became a burden. Friday afternoons would be the time of frantic phone calls among the committee members: "Can you think of anything good for this week?" It was found too that governance by committee was not feasible, especially when there was to be one *Shaliah Tsibur* for the Hebrew portions of the service. He would take the group in one particular mood direction; readings by committee members would often be at variance with his liturgical mood. It was then decided that the planning of the entire service (aside from the Torah portion) would be in the hands of the *Shaliah Tsibur*, and that he would be responsible for additional readings and interpretations as well as the *davening* itself.

From a spiritual point of view, I think we reached the point where we realized that we were burdened by a combination of modes of expression that simply did not sit well with one another: a good poetry reading, a good concert, and a good *davnen* just cannot be mingled to produce anything other than a staccato hodgepodge. The choice was for *davening*: poetry was largely eliminated and music became group singing, with and without words. Outside readings are today sometimes used as an introduction to the service or as part of a comment on the Torah reading, but the main body of *Shaharit* employs the Siddur alone.

Much of this semi-conscious process became clear to us in an important conversation we had last year with Alan Grossman, of the English Department at Brandeis, who spoke to the *Havurah* on "Poetry and Prayer." We came to realize there that poetic experience and liturgical experience differ deeply from one another; the former is deeply personal and private, the latter communal and public. Poetry can celebrate a moment in itself; the task of liturgy is, by evoking its myth-structure, to bind that moment to eternity. We have come to realize that ridiculously poor poetry (*eyn kelohenu*, *adirey ayumah*, etc.) can be great liturgy *davke* because of its repetitive quality and its power to evoke group response, while a magnificent poem can simply fall flat as liturgy.

Now let me turn to a brief description of our current liturgical patterns. Our current weekly liturgy revolves around three events: *Kabbalat Shabbat*, *Shaharit* on Shabbat morning, and *Seudah Shlishit*. The public is invited only to the Shabbat morning service, though of course anyone who attends the other two events is welcome. But in tone *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Seudah Shlishit* are more intimate moments for the *Havurah* "family"; on Shabbat morning we *Haverim* are in a minority.

Kabbalat Shabbat (before dinner), said by candlelight, begins with a few moments of meditation and *nigun* singing (often *Yedid Nefesh*) and then proceeds into the regular Hebrew liturgy. The Psalms are usually chanted *shtibl*-fashion in a rather loud cacophony; there is a real build-up of intensity climaxing at *Lekhah Dodi*. That is the focal point of the service, sung to various tunes but always with great intense involvement. *Ma'ariv* is quiet, rising to outcry only for *Shma Yisrael*, and concludes with a *nigun* after the *Amidah*. The *nigun* there is important; it allows for a release and downward flow after the service; it takes us from *Amidah* to "Gut Shabbos" without abruptness. The passages after the *Amidah*, on the other hand, are seldom recited—they seem to make the service too long, or rather to draw it out beyond its moments of greatest power, where we feel it should be left.

Shabbat morning worship begins at 10:30 (a reasonable hour

for a *shul* of young people—but a bit late for this early riser's personal taste), and lasts about two hours. I should say that throughout our liturgy there is no emphasis on "getting through" quantity of material. We much prefer an abbreviated service to a rushed one; if the *nigun* around *El Adon* goes on for ten minutes, that can be a highlight of the service.

The service begins with a preparation period: that can be a *d'var Torah*, a reading a *nigun*, some selections from the Psalms in the *Siddur*, or some combination of the above. It is assumed that the *shatz* has thought this out, and really is leading the group into the particular mode of that week's *davening* as he sees it. *Shaharit* itself begins with *Nishmat* and goes through the *Amidah*. The leader may choose to *daven* for a while from the English rather than the Hebrew page, he may (and usually will) intersperse the *tefillah* with wordless *nigunim*, he may offer some interpretation of a particular passage, he may tell a relevant story at some point. All this is highly informal; obviously the *Haverim* place great trust in the *Haver* who has volunteered to lead them that week.

A few words about our Shabbat-morning congregation: we generally have seventy-five to a hundred people, mostly of college age. More than half are familiar enough with Hebrew liturgy to follow, if not to understand. Perhaps a third of the *kahal* understands the Hebrew text without translation. The others are encouraged to sing along with the *nigunim*, to *daven* aloud in English, or to use the chant as a background for meditation. Some obviously have felt left out by the Hebrew in the service, but we try to make up for that by general informality, friendliness, and encouragement. It is clear that we live with two often competing claims: a liturgy that is authentic to us as a *Havurah* versus a liturgy planned for the outside people who come. We try to do it somewhere in between, sacrificing neither personal integrity nor friendliness; it's sometimes a tough balance.

We do not repeat the *Amidah*, but rather allow the *Kedushah* (often the climax of the service) to proceed aloud from the silence of the *Amidah*. Repetitions generally don't

seem to make sense to us, and the passivity of the *Kahal* during the repetition¹ would be a burden on the totally participatory flavor of our service.

The Torah is taken out, carried through the *Kahal*, and a part of the *Parashah* is read. We have only one *Aliyah* (Women or couples together are welcome; we have occasionally had female *shelihot tsibur* as well, with great success). The *Aliyah* is read from the scroll in a sort of undertone, and a modern English translation is read simultaneously. The *Oleh* concludes the *Berakhah*, after which the reader will either give a *D'var Torah*, or, more commonly, say just a few words to open discussion on the *Parashah*. Informal discussion often goes quite well, and can last as long as half an hour. It has to be well fielded by the reader (who sits in the middle of the *kahal*), but people often feel free to say both intellectually exciting and rather personal things.

After the return of the Torah there is a bit of singing—from the *Siddur* or wordless *nigunim*, and the service is concluded. We have not felt that *Musaf* works for us—not for any ideological reasons, but rather structurally. Once the *davnen* mood has moved into discussion mood it seems a mighty effort to go back—and hasn't yet really made sense to us. *Kiddush* after the service is a time for communal announcements, general socializing, and meeting some of the new people.

Seudah Shlishit is more of a free-form liturgical moment for us. We have neither *Minhah* nor *Ma'ariv* together; those who want to say them do so privately; for most of us that would be too much. The meal itself is largely symbolic: *hallah*, wine, and *nasherei*. We do it around a long table, in the relative darkness. *Motzi* will be followed by *nigunim*, which can go quite some time. There may be informal *Divre Torah*, continuation of the morning's *Parashah* discussion or, occasionally, a prepared talk by one of the *Haverim*. By tacit agreement the meal is mostly silent; private conversations in corners of the table are seen as a disturbance and generally don't happen. *Birkat ha-Mazon* is followed directly by *Havdalah*, still around the table.

We have become quite traditional in our forms, though not bound by Halakhic requirements. The *Havurah* today is perhaps best described as a non-Orthodox *shtibl*. It should be noted that most of our *Haverim* come from backgrounds where these forms were not unfamiliar: most of us are post-Ramah, USY, day school education, visit to Israel, or some deeply formative Jewish experiences. Those who do come to us with little previous Jewish background at this point seem to fit well into our rather traditional liturgical pattern.

The ongoing struggle for appropriate liturgical forms within the *Havurah* has at times been a painful one. Surely each of the *Haverim*, at one time or another, has been deeply uncomfortable with a given service. But that very uncomfortableness is a moment of growth, and the struggle that emerges from it, in this area as in so many others, is what makes *Havurat Shalom* so exciting for us.

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