

**Building a Listening Room, Maturing Student Prayer:  
Creating Intentional Religious Environments and Practices  
in the Traditional Jewish Day School**

**Background and Exigency**

In traditional yeshiva high schools, Tefila is often not "taught" at all but functions as more of a synagogue microcosm--but with teachers serving as enforcers and normalizers of misbehavior. Without the incentives of grades and with school's expectation that students will recite a book of prayers with absolute focus and meaning, students often grow frustrated and overwhelmed by the routinized religious ritual of prayer--and often disconnect Jewish prayer from spiritual practices.

And not only must students engage in tefila as a normative practice, but we expect that they will do so without their minds drifting into the rush of the school day to come, and with all of the stresses that accompany the day. Our challenge, as educators, is to teach tefila so that it is not only a normalizing, communal practice but a spiritual one--one that will nurture and sustain our students' rich emotional, religious, and yes, spiritual lives as they mature through and beyond high school. And I believe that we must start with a clear understanding that while students might be equipped to do so already with their advanced and maturing understanding of the siddur, we must create a *space* where this sort of spiritual focus is encouraged--and becomes natural.

In my work on Tefila, I have thought about, proposed, and worked on [various ideas and projects](#) related to increasing student engagement in Tefila. In the particular capacity of a facilitator of an alternatively structured tefila, I have built a tefila space that both quiets and focuses students around conventional tefila practice through deliberate practices of mindfulness meditation built into the tefila--before, and during the prayers themselves--while still maintaining the full ritualized practice of Orthodox prayer. My theory, which has played out for the past four years and for over 100 students, is that a stilled body allows for a focused mind, and a quieted, focused mind allows for optimal tefila experiences. Setting students up for success, in other words, has everything to do with setting up tefila properly so that it might be a strengthening, cathartic, and transformative experience.

In what follows, I offer a brief outline of the particular program and space in which my "meditation tefila" takes place. This tefila meets for two two-month sessions in the fall and spring semesters and has been doing so for the past two years at SAR High School under my guided instruction and participatory leadership. Three years ago, it met every morning from Sukkot to Pesach. Premised on the Shulchan Aruch's preference for minimalist tefila as "me'at b'kavanah" (say less, but with intention) in order to teach religious practice, students follow the "matbea" (basic form) of tefila, including all aspects of tefila that require a minyan.

## Creating a Listening Room

I have found that the framing of the environment and relationship to one's environment, seat, and own embedded and embodied sense is the key to growing students' spiritual practice in the act of prayer. In teaching intentional movement and stillness in tefila, meditation tefila assumes that young adults need not be policed to perform--and even grow--as students of the siddur. Instead, students succeed at prayer by first calming themselves, much as the mishna in Brachot 5:1 recommends, before Tefila, through an intentional environment that emphasizes intentional steps of relaxation, focus, and *kavanah*.

Students' own ownership of the space is framed from their very arrival. Because the prayer space is in a classroom, every day demands a new assembly and dis-assembly, and so a primary and introductory teaching, of the prayer space, is to "leave no trace"--an environmentally sound ethic and spiritual teaching in its own right. Because I, the only teacher, manage a space that includes 30-40 students, students are active participants in arranging the space.

Year after year, I have arranged for the group to meet in the top corner of the building--on the 6th floor, and overlooking the Bronx's vast Van-Cortlandt Park and sunrise through floor to ceiling windows. The vision of sky, clouds, birds, and forest cover sets the still and magnificent tone for the tefila.

The seating arrangement itself reflects the rigor and isolation of this distinct tefila practice. While arranging their seats, students are told that they must have an elbow's length of distance from their colleagues. Instead of arranging the space as a social space with rows of seats, in other words, the emphasis here is on the independent and individual experience and practice--and the arrangement of chairs at a proximate distance from one another reflects that. Much as both a traditional tefila at SAR HS might have, I, the instructor sit at the front of the room facing the students--and right in front of the mechitza in order to be visible by both girls and boys.

Thus, from the very start, students take ownership of the space not only by arranging the space but by maintaining the silence while signing themselves in. Here, trust is built into their self-reporting late arrivals, too. Instead of an instructor monitoring late arrivals or taking attendance, students sign themselves in (noting name and time-in) on the daily attendance sheet left by the room's entrance--and then take a siddur for themselves. Both boys and girls are asked to leave their phones beneath their chairs to keep their hands still, and boys are expected to put tefilin on before tefilot begin. Failure to sign in or to wrap tefilin is dealt with outside of the prayer space, not during or within it, in order to maintain focus and decorum.

By building this sacred space of prayer, students are primed to respond to the subsequent instruction, which teaches respect for and devotion to the ritual of prayer through guided instruction around mindful intention in breath, utterance, and movement. In this way, the practice of prayer is a singularly spiritual, independent, and devotional act as much as it's a shared communal one.

## Practicing Intentional Prayer

The entire session takes no more than 40 minutes. The morning prayers open with the teacher's recitation of Birchot Ha'shachar. Even if students are distracted or talking, this recitation itself serves as the opening "bell" or call to attention. With the minute or so of such recitation coming to a close, students are generally silent as they wait for what's next. The contrast, at this moment, between the sound of prayer and the immediate silence that follows it is not only striking but an essential component of this tefila space.

Students are then told to take their seats, and for five minutes are directed to draw attention to their posture, breath, mind, and personal prayer in order to follow the Mishnaic dictum (Brachot 5:1) that the original pietists would sit for a moment before praying:

1. Posture: Students are told to sit on the edge of their seats in an upright posture, hands free (phones are stored beneath their seats) and coming to rest on their knees, sensory gates attentive but stilled. They might notice the sounds in the hallway or outside, and they should simply listen to those thoughts. In this posture, students are told to ensure that their knees extend from their chairs at 90 degree angles, and that their backs draw a straight line from their heads' crown to their seat.
2. Breath: Next, in sitting as still as possible, all attention is drawn to their noses and bellies, and the way that the breath is warmed in their noses and causes their stomachs to expand and contract. We take a few deep breaths, counting to three on each inhale and exhale.
3. Mind: students are instructed to watch the parade of their thoughts and refer to steps #1 and #2 as their anchors. As their thoughts and feelings rise, they are told simply to watch those thoughts. Here, the teaching of becoming the watcher and not the thinker is a central one for not resisting, but simply noticing what arises.
4. Prayer: finally, as thoughts become fewer and farther between, students are directed to listen deeply to the activity of their souls. What emerges? What feelings, desires, or emotions begin to rise? They are instructed to continue to notice what arises here, but also, to notice the deep prayers of their souls. This heard prayer, they are told, will fuel the articulated prayers to be spoken as they proceed through the siddur.

After five minutes of guided and then silent meditation instruction, students continue to pray *pesukei d'zimra* all the way up to Yishtabach, but to do so in absolute silence (without the conventional chazan's repetition of each paragraph closing). I tell students, as they do so, that their sole task is to maintain the pristine silence of the space and to ensure that as they pray, they don't get out of breath.

When students reach Borchu, guidance and then practice of intentional standing and then bowing--both taught and then later simply performed--frame the prayer. Students are taught how to stand still at this moment in a simple mountain pose; then, they are guided through bowing as a spiritual technique. Reference here is made to the Talmud's description of bowing in prayer as extending, relaxing, and then straightening up all vertebrae. Students, once again, are taught to practice standing and bowing as critical motions in the tefila process--movements that actually make all the difference while prayer.

In order to maintain the silence, students continue praying silently from Borchu until reaching Sh'ma, where they stop to focus on Sh'ma as the cornerstone of contemplative practice and spiritual understanding. At this point, students are prompted to focus on the following intentions spread over over the course of our two month session:

1. listening deeply to God's oneness
2. knowing this oneness through the experience of being chosen out of love (the theme of the blessing that precedes Sh'ma)
3. knowing that this knowledge of God's oneness and God's love inspires a reciprocal love of commitment, in return (the recitation of V'ahavta).
4. understanding that Sh'ma is listening to both multiplicity and unity, to the name that is 70 (shin-mem-ayin) and the name that is one (echad).
5. Practicing listening techniques, as prescribed by the Sefer Yetzira, by repeating the opening sounds of Shin and Mem (warm and cooling vibrations) in the form of deep breathing.
6. Practicing contemplative techniques--mantra techniques--in a Kirtan-style call and response repetitive chanting of the entire verse of Sh'ma.

Following one of the above kavanot, students proceed quietly through Sh'ma and meet up once again in a standing pose before Shmone Esre.

At this point, students once again practice intentional standing and bowing precede Shmone Esre. Students are taught to maintain focus on posture, breath, and thoughts as they maintain the active pose of standing--and they are instructed to stand as still as possible, to maintain this posture, throughout Shmone Esre. Stilled standing posture encourages a comparable thought posture, and assertion and surrender, in this vein, are stressed as the key dispositions that might emerge will reciting Shmone Esre:

1. As the most transcendent moment of Tefila, we attempt to speak and listen at the same time--to listen to our voice as if it were God's (Hashem Sefatai Tiftach U'fi Yagid Tehilatech)
2. Students are challenged to mature their understanding of Baruch Atah Hashem--so that it translates as "You are the source of blessing, Hashem"
3. Students are taught to think about the structure of each blessing as both a statement of self and then a negation of that self. A wish of one's will that then transitions into a submission to God's will.

Most critically, then, students arrive at Shmone Esre about 30 minutes into the session--and due to the varying times that students take to say Shmone Esre with these kavanot, we say a "haychi Kedusha" to allow optimal time for recitation of the silent Shmone Esre.

Following Shmone Esre, students continue quietly until reciting the remainder of the weekday tefila. When we met every day, we would read the Torah as part of our service. Now we only meet on non-Torah reading days (Tues/Wed/Fri), which allows for a more focused and sustained quiet prayer space. At the end of Tefila, student quietly dissemble the room and return it to its classroom "form," leaving no trace that a contemplative meditation tefila had taken place.