

Creating Community through Tefillah, Tefillah through Community

■ by **AYTAN KADDEN**

Based in an Israeli school that includes students who identify as both “religious” and “secular,” the author describes how the school has created a tefillah experience for each group.

As dawn breaks over the Judean Desert parents and children are slowly wending their way to Ein Fu’ar, the spring which lies beneath Kfar Adumim. It is nearly 6 AM on one of the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the fifth grade, their parents and teachers have gathered for a unique selichot experience. The rav bet sefer (rabbi-in-residence) welcomes the group and invites everyone to appreciate the majesty of the hills surrounding the spring.

For the next hour, students, parents and teachers will join together praying the ancient piyyutim (religious poetry) of the selichot, sharing stories from newer and older traditions, and singing modern Israeli songs on the theme of beginnings, change and prayer. The morning continues with tefillah for those inclined to a traditional prayer and and Siach Shacharit (morning conversation) for those interested in a unique discussion about the new year.

This magical hour has become an annual tradition in the Kfar Adumim Experimental Elementary School (grades 1-8; “elementary” in Israel traditionally went to eighth grade). The excitement and success surrounding this event can be proven by the simple fact that grades 4-8 have each found new venues for similar selichot as well as new experiences to expand the basic concept. Behind each new attempt lies a common theme: community as a core expression in tefillah.

Parents, children and teachers are drawn together and a sense of a community is formed.

The Kfar Adumim Experimental Elementary School was founded in 1980 as an institution that would raise and educate religious, traditional and secular students together to respect and learn from one another. In the Israeli education system, state run schools are forced to define themselves as either religious or secular. Families who prefer a more nuanced view of Jewish Israeli society often find themselves without a school that reflects their beliefs. As a response to this bifurcation, the initial mandate of the school was to bring together students from families with different backgrounds to learn to tolerate, respect and value the other.

During the last several years the school has been investigating and experimenting with a new question: Beyond simply living together, how does our shared life influence our Jewish experience? Through the Ministry of Education’s experimental wing, we received a grant to study the impact that our joint life has on our shared spiritual life. In a team spearheaded by principal Amira Perlov, over the past several years we have investigat-

ed this issue through study, community service and shared experiences related to the Jewish calendar. Most recently, we have begun to investigate how tefillah can be expressed in and enrich a mixed community school. As we strive to define and create an appropriate expression for tefillah in our school, we have come to recognize and rediscover the centrality of community in tefillah.



Aytan Kadden is the rav bet sefer and Judaics coordinator at the Kfar Adumim Elementary School. He can be reached at ravaytan@gmail.com.

Tefillah, Jewish prayer, has always been seen as a communal experience. The original authors of the Amidah made certain to express the prayer in the plural form, as the amora Abbaye says: “[In prayer] one should always connect oneself with the community” (BT Brakhot 30b). The beit kneset is a place of meeting as well as a place for prayer. Minyan has been the traditional expression behind critical questions of community: Who is part of our community? Where and when does the community meet? What is the content of our meeting? As we have begun to delve into tefillah as community we have asked ourselves these question and more. Three of the central questions that have served as a compass for our thoughts and work on tefillah are:

1) Is there an expression of tefillah that can be developed within parts of a community that do not see themselves as



halachically obligated or spiritually connected to prayer?

2) Must prayer be defined within the classic parameters of venue, text and community?

3) As our community strives for spiritual growth in prayer, is there a limit to the flexibility that we can afford to express while remaining connected to the continuum of our traditions?

Prayers Old and New

Keeping 700 students orderly and calm at an assembly in a cramped social hall can be a challenge. However, when the first notes of Hallel are belted out, the students lean forward to see which of their friends is the chazzan and are naturally swept up in the song and hand motions that they have passed on from month to month and year to year. One of the richest expressions of community tefillah we have developed over the last

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several years has been the Rosh Chodesh ceremony.

This monthly assembly has seen varied expressions of teacher and student input, yet its core has been in place since its inception: the Hallel prayer, piyyut and modern Israeli song. Heftziba Kelner, our music instructor, has taken upon herself the task of teaching the students the Psalms of Hallel, medieval as well as modern piyyut and modern Israeli song as part of our music curriculum. This educational project has produced moments of prayer that span from King David through traditional Iraqi or Ethiopian piyyut to Naomi Shemer and Ehud Manor. In this way we are able to include and connect to the cultural traditions that reflect our varied student body.

Through this experience we have expanded

our community through prayer. Each individual student gains a connection to his/her family's cultural heritage while they also develop a new respect for the cultures of the communities of their classmates. New immigrants from Ethiopia are no longer seen as temporary immigrant students staying for a year or so bussed in from their absorption center, but as representatives of a culture that can enrich the makeup and prayer of our wider school community. In this experience we have learned that prayer can be experienced outside of the synagogue, can include non-canonical texts and can bring together elements from varied backgrounds to widen and strengthen our entire community.

As we have learned to expand the texts of our communal tefillah and to be more

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inclusive of a wider community we have also learned to include parents, natural members of a school community that are frequently forgotten. While preparing to present our second graders with sid-durim, we invited their parents to participate in a workshop which centered around the question of what tefillah means to them. Is tefillah a presence in their lives, a memory from their childhood, or perhaps something they never participated in and are experiencing for the first time together with their children? By including the parents and their connections to tefillah in our wider conversation we are further expanding the community of prayer while strengthening the core of our community—the students.

Two Shuls on One Island... and Beyond

We are all familiar with the joke of one Jew and two shuls, so perhaps 700 kids and two shuls would not be so bad...

As the bell rings at 8 o'clock the students of Kfar Adumim can be found together in the playground rebounding basketballs, kicking goals and skipping on the hopscotch court. With a little bit (or a lot) of cajoling the students make their way to their homerooms. However, they do not stay in the classroom for long. Some of the children join other kids in their grade for tefillah. Other kids meet up with students in a multi age forum and find their way to groups of their choice for Siach Shacharit.

As a mixed, pluralistic school we have experimented with various options to create a meaningful experience parallel to tefillah. Under the leadership of Shirley Shoval we have developed a program called Siach Shacharit. The program was developed with the intention of mimicking certain elements of tefillah: a communal gathering which provides time for introspection and discussion. This program, which has taken off in the last five years, offers various multi-age groups from which the children choose at the beginning of the year and

attend each morning. Teachers are encouraged to create a curriculum based on their hobbies and interests providing for rich and varied options. Furthermore, in certain groups a poem or song has been instituted as an opening or closing to each session, a "set prayer" for the group.

In these meetings the students start the day in a self selected group, in a calm atmosphere, engaged in open conversation and meaningful experiences. Over the years students have chosen between groups that focus on working in the community garden, music, literature, crafts, current events, chasidic stories and other topics. The elements of a varied beginning to the day, choice, and multi-age groups have made Siach Shacharit a great success. In this experiment we have discovered new communities within our school and new voices (both among the staff and students!) within ourselves.

Due to the great success of this alternative, we have invested fresh energies into our traditional tefillah as well. In this realm we have found ourselves constantly experimenting (as so many others have) with various tools: song and stories, a personal siddur, prayer journals, Q+A about tefillah, and much more. Currently we are engaging teachers in workshops designed to allow them to discover prayer as individuals. We believe that if a teacher has asked *herself* meaningful, spiritual questions she will be better equipped to lead tefillah with her students. While some of these ideas have produced a richer tefillah, engaging children in a meaningful prayer on a daily basis continues to challenge the staff and students.

For our next steps we have focused our attention on Israeli society today and in particular at the communities surrounding the school. In these we see people who are equally comfortable and interested in traditional tefillah as they are in a fuller experience surrounding tefillah. They are creating new groups and communities which are expanding the boundaries of traditional tefillah to include varied spiritual explorations and expressions of community.

We believe that tefillah in school must reflect our wider community. We would like to provide this model for our students. We envision a spectrum of opportunities—from traditional tefillah to open siach—with many alternatives in-between that can include different expressions of the two sides: piyyut, meditation, song, guided imagery, dialogue relating to communal, religious and national identity, and much more.

In this experiment we are questioning the nature of the plurality of voices in our community. In the past we indeed had two shuls—one for traditional prayer and one for siach. For many years, the two groups did not mingle during those experiences. We would now like to enrich our community—by forming not one shul, but several. By choosing plurality over uniformity, we can provide our students with the opportunity to give new spiritual expression within the broader school community. Certain children will lead the way in traditional tefillah, others will take charge in Siach and still others will combine these worlds to create together new voices and new groups within our larger community.

Through the examples described here we have shared our efforts to grapple with the questions presented earlier. Through Siach Shacharit we have attempted to develop a program that provides an alternative to tefillah while maintaining a framework that reflects elements of tefillah. In creating unique experiences such as selichot and Rosh Chodesh we have reconsidered questions of venue of prayer and text in addition to strengthening our community. Finally in our current experiment we are engaging teachers to lend their unique voice to tefillah. As an outgrowth of that we seek to explore the limits and guidelines of tefillah in our community.

We certainly do not imagine that we have reached the end of a process. We hope that we have developed certain approaches and experiences that enrich our community and can be of assistance and guidance to others. Over the next few years we will continue to create and wrestle with the challenge of tefillah. ■