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## ■ ENGAGING WORSHIP: TWO STUDY SESSIONS FOR CONGREGATIONAL BOARDS

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Providing for and sustaining communal prayer or worship is at the core of every congregation's responsibilities to its members. Therefore, each congregational Board of Trustees must assume a leadership role in this sacred task. We suggest that you devote forty-five to sixty minutes at the beginning of two consecutive board meetings to studying about worship. Some boards may choose to divide this material into twenty-minute sessions that will take place over the course of six months. These study sessions were created specifically for the above purpose.

### How to Use These Study Sessions

- We suggest that these sessions be led by your rabbi or your rabbi and president.
- Board members should be informed in advance that this study will be part of the board meeting.
- If members of your clergy team do not ordinarily attend board meetings, invite your rabbis and cantors as well as the Worship/Ritual Committee chair to participate in these sessions.

### Goals

- For the board to understand that worship is a central function of the synagogue.
- For the board to recognize its responsibility to support the worship life of the congregation as part of its mandate as trustees.
- For the board to understand that partnership between the clergy and congregants is necessary for creating meaningful worship.

### Objectives

- The board will take an active, ongoing interest in promoting communal worship.
- The board will direct the Worship/Ritual Committee to study and open a congregational dialogue about worship.

### Rationale

Our Jewish tradition teaches us that the world is sustained by three things: Torah, *avodah* and *g'milut chasadim*—Torah, worship and deeds of loving-kindness. Prayer is at the heart of our existence. Through prayer we are offered the opportunity to connect with the Sacred. Providing for and sustaining communal worship is at the core of a congregation's responsibilities to its members. Therefore, every congregational board must recognize its leadership role in this sacred task.

When we look at the communal prayer life of our movement, we see much that is successful and fulfilling. Some of our congregations offer rich and varied worship opportunities. But we also know that many congregants have not yet been touched by our Shabbat communal worship. Over the years we have come to accept the absence of the vast majority of our congregants at worship by building smaller chapels because we can't fill our sanctuaries with worshipers; by allowing our Worship/Ritual Committees to stagnate or disappear because we give them only the most trivial tasks instead of inviting them to forge a true partnership with our clergy; and by abdicating our role in the worship experience while expecting/allowing our clergy to become performers instead of leaders of prayer.

But, as the song goes, “the times they are a-changin’.” At this moment in time, there is a renewed interest in the life of the spirit. Our congregants and those who are not yet affiliated are looking for communities that will help them become educated and fulfilled Jews. They desire worship that will uplift them and engage them, that will motivate them to be better people, connect them to a community of other seekers and help them find their place in this world.

The journey to reinvigorating worship in our congregations begins with the following three steps: taking worship seriously, recognizing that change is difficult and building a partnership between the congregants and clergy. These two study sessions were designed to help your board embark on this journey.

## SESSION 1: WHY WORSHIP MATTERS

### A. THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUALITY

We begin with two texts from two different books about modern-day Jewish spiritual quests. One excerpt offers the reader a glimpse into the author's renewed appreciation of worship, and the other chronicles the author's moment of awakening. We hope that the texts and the questions that follow will lead you to a discussion about your own such moments of awakening or renewal of faith.

#### Study Texts

1. I tried the Shabbat service at Chochmat Halev, a center for Jewish meditation and learning whose name means “wisdom of the heart.” I knew I'd have to peel off my shoes, sit cross-legged on the floor, meditate on command. By the end, I'd probably have to hold hands with strangers.

The place was packed. A boisterous crowd spilled out the door. Mounds of worn shoes blocked the entrance. Coats were mashed into all kinds of places. Inside, congregants covered the floor, sitting, squatting, and kneeling knee to knee.

I arrived just in time for the guided meditation and sat near the back. A woman in white tapped lightly on a drum and told a story about the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism. Periodically, she'd pause and ask us to check in with our bodies: We'd concentrate on our breath, our posture, the way our weight shifted lower as our bodies relaxed. The room itself seemed to settle after awhile. The people around me began to sway, almost imperceptibly.

Then the prayers—songs, really—began. The energy in the room shifted. I've seen this phenomenon before. People seem to come into a service as individuals. They're separate, distracted, disconnected even, from the people around them. Then a choreography begins. The rabbi, or the cantor, or the layperson leading the service motions to the congregation. Folks lean over, pull out their prayer books, flip to the proper page almost in unison. They stand up, clear their throats. They open their mouths and sing.

During the songs, a change happens. These individuals become something more. They become part of a whole, a community. They become part of a heritage, a civilization. They're connected by voice, by sound, by melody. Sometimes they become part of each other, part of whatever they call God.

Lisa Schiffman, *generation j*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999, pp. 94–95

2. On March 24, 1996, which was Nisan 5, 5756, my father died. In the year that followed, I said the prayer known as the Mourner's *Kaddish* three times daily—during the morning service, the afternoon service, and the evening service—in a synagogue in Washington and, when I was away from home, in synagogues elsewhere. It was my duty to say it, for reasons that will become clear in this book.

I was struck almost immediately by the poverty of my knowledge about the ritual that I was performing with such unexpected fidelity. And it was not long before I understood that I

would not succeed in insulating the rest of my existence from the impact of this obscure and arduous practice. The symbols were seeping into everything. A season of sorrow became a season of soul renovation, for which I was not at all prepared.

Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, p. vii

### Questions

1. What was powerful about the experience of worship for Schiffman?
2. What surprised Wieseltier about observing *Kaddish* for his father?
3. Do you see any similarities between your worship experiences and those of the two authors?
4. Have you had a life experience that caused you to reevaluate your own connection to God and to Judaism?

### B. HOW DOES WORSHIP IMPACT OUR LIVES?

The texts below address the following issues: How does participation in worship impact our individual lives, and how would the participation in communal worship by a large number of your congregants impact the life of your synagogue? Once again, the texts and questions are aimed at encouraging you to share your own worship experiences.

#### Study Texts

1. To attain a degree of spiritual security, one cannot rely upon one's own resources. One needs an atmosphere in which the concern for the spirit is shared by a community. We are in need of students and scholars, masters and specialists. But we need also the company of witnesses, of human beings who are engaged in worship, who for a moment sense the truth that life is meaningless without an attachment to God...

Pondering his religious existence, a Jew will realize that some of the greatest spiritual events happen in moments of prayer. Worship is the source of religious experience, of religious insight, and religiously some of us live by what happens to us in the hours we spend in the synagogue. These hours have been in the past the wellsprings of insight, the wellsprings of faith. Are these wellsprings still open in our time?

Abraham J. Heschel, "The Vocation of the Cantor"

2. Jews need one another, and therefore congregations, to do primary religious acts that they should not, and probably cannot, do alone. Doing primary religious acts is the only way we have of growing as Jews. Consequently, it is also the only justification for the existence of a congregation. Everything else congregations do, Jews can always do cheaper, easier, and better somewhere else.

There are three ancient kinds of primary Jewish acts: holy study, communal prayer, and good deeds, or in the classical language of *Pirkei Avot*: Torah, *avodah*, and *g'milut chasadim*. This is not a capricious categorization. Prayer is emotional: song, candles, dance, meditation, and silence. A matter of the heart. Study is intellectual: reading, questioning, discussion, rigorous logic, and argument. A matter of the head. And good deeds are public acts: helping, repairing, marching, fighting, and doing. Matters of the hand. Only rare individuals are able to do all three with equal fervor and skill. And so our membership in a congregation and association with a broad spectrum of Jews will compensate for our personal deficiencies.

Lawrence Kushner, "The Tent-Peg Business: Some Truths about Congregations"

3. “Ritual communication is not about the communication of information,” Mr. Seale [an associate professor of liturgy at the University of Notre Dame] has written, “but about the rehearsal of meaning, bonding people together in a common stance toward life.” Ritual speech does not send new messages back and forth between believers and God, he points out: “It enacts relationships.”

Peter Steinfelds, “Catholics Still Seek the Poetry of the Mass,”  
*The New York Times*, December 11, 1988

### Questions

1. The Heschel excerpt asks, “Are these wellsprings still open in our time?” How would you answer that question?
2. What impact does worship have on your life?
3. What impact does worship have on your congregation?

### C. HOW ARE WE DOING?

This part of the study session provides you with the opportunity to gather some significant data about your congregation. This data will help you to ascertain where in synagogue life your congregants invest their time. Discussing why they make the choices they do may lead you to a better understanding of your congregation. Remember, this is not just about numbers but about building a stronger community that will be able to support its members in times of joy and difficulty, provide adult models of lifelong Jewish involvement for your children and become a force for political and social change.

### Study Material

The discussion leader presents the following data, which should be collected prior to the meeting. This information will have a greater impact if it is presented orally as well as visually in a pie chart, on the chalkboard or in the form of a handout.

- The number of adult members in the congregation
- The number of children under the age of eighteen
- The number of adult attendees at Shabbat evening services on a typical Shabbat
- The number of children at Shabbat evening services on a typical Shabbat
- The number of adult congregants who attend Shabbat morning services
- The number of children who attend Shabbat morning services
- The number of people who attend Rosh HaShanah/Yom Kippur services
- The percentage of adult congregants who attend on a typical Shabbat evening
- The percentage of adult congregants who attend Shabbat morning services
- The percentage of adult congregants who attend Rosh HaShanah/Yom Kippur services

### Questions

1. Which are the best-attended programs in your congregation?
2. Which programs have the largest percentage of adult congregational participants?
3. Why do you think that more adults attend those programs than attend Shabbat services?
4. If I were a new member of your synagogue, what would I assume are the core values of the congregation? Is attendance at communal worship one of them? How would I know that?
5. What would a full sanctuary every Shabbat mean to your congregation? How would it impact the rest of your synagogue’s programs?

## SESSION 2: GETTING UNSTUCK

### A. WHAT'S WRONG WITH WORSHIP TODAY?

The following texts will expose you to some of the current criticism of our movement's practices. This exercise is not intended to be used as a critique of your congregational worship in specific but is designed to elicit a discussion of worship in general.

#### Study Texts

1. Worship dysfunction has been going on for so long that people are not even sure they can or should pray. So changing the worship system to facilitate worship will require, first and foremost, the recognition that worship moments are desirable and possible. When it comes to worship, people are so culturally deprived they don't even know what to look for.

Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only*.  
Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 1999, p. 112

2. Rabbis and cantors have become like conductors leading an orchestra made up of people who can't read music.

Daniel H. Frelander

3. Dramaturgical and stage directions of any kind (such as stand up, sit down, read responsively, etc.) only remind people that they don't know what's going on or that other people can actually pray for them. Isn't it odd that people who have attended services regularly for twenty years still have to be told when to stand up? Indeed, a visitor from another planet would have to assume that most services were designed primarily to make an occasional, non-Jewish visitor feel comfortable. What would happen if services were designed instead to make the regulars feel at home?

A gimmick is a way to get someone to attend services that has nothing to do with the service. It is hardly surprising therefore that people who have come to watch some officers be installed, or someone get honored or birthday-blessed, or a third-grade class perform, or whatever will spend most of the rest of the time during the service sleeping or looking as if he or she is sucking lemons.

Lawrence Kushner, "The Human Pyramid"

#### Questions

1. Which of the above criticisms ring true for you?
2. With which do you disagree?
3. Do you have any other criticisms of Reform Jewish worship?

### B. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Review the following three steps for worship change. If at the end of this process there is a consensus that you are willing to undertake a process of reflection on, study of and experimentation with your Shabbat worship, then continue on to the last section.

#### Step 1: Begin to take worship seriously.

Liturgies that work do more than entertain: They make moral demands on us that transcend the similar claim of dramas in general. We are expected to take the liturgical message home with us, internalized in our psyche. The liturgical drama doesn't end with

the final song of benediction. Our day-to-day lives testify to liturgical success when we act out the message of our prayers in moral behavior.

Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only*.  
Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 1999, p. 241

### Questions

1. What would taking worship seriously mean for your congregation? How might it change the way your congregation functions?
2. Once you have resolved to take worship seriously, what would you as congregational leaders need to do differently?

### Step 2: Remember that change is difficult.

Few changes in religious life are as important—or as traumatic—as changes in the forms of worship. Episcopalians still debate the 1979 revision of *The Book of Common Prayer*. An avalanche of letters protested reports that the commission revising the hymnal for the United Methodist Church might eliminate “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” (It didn’t.) A modification of ritual language or physical demeanor during worship may reshape people’s faith far more drastically than volumes of theological theory or church pronouncements.

Peter Steinfelds, “Catholics Still Seek the Poetry of the Mass”

### Questions

1. If you were to change some elements of your communal worship, which changes do you think would be “traumatic” to members of your congregation? Can you identify two or three parallels to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”?
2. What are two or three ways in which you as a board could help make the process of worship transformation smoother?

### Step 3: Build a partnership between the congregants and clergy.

1. Jewish worship is a carefully choreographed, multilayered dialogue between prayer leaders and the congregation, between individual worshipers and their communities, between each individual and God and between the individual worshiper and herself or himself. Therefore, worship change requires a partnership between the congregants and clergy. Your Worship/Ritual Committee is where that partnership should begin. The committee must become a “worship work group.”

Sue Ann Wasserman

2. The members of the congregation must nurture one another because they need one another. They simply cannot do it alone. Hermits and monasteries are noticeably absent from Jewish history; we are a hopelessly communal people.

Lawrence Kushner, “The Tent-Peg Business: Some Truths about Congregations”

### Questions

1. Whose responsibility is it to think about, plan for and sustain communal worship in your congregation?
2. On what does your Worship/Ritual Committee spend most of its time?

3. Is your existing Worship/Ritual Committee the right entity to do this work? Would you be better served by creating a separate Worship Work Group?

### **C. DEVELOPING A PLAN**

1. Together read the fanciful (but instructive) tale of Temple Oy Vey, which appears on page 7.
2. Review the accompanying Plan that begins at the bottom of page 7.
3. Decide on a course of action for your congregation.