FINDING COMMON GROUND IN UNCOMMON SOUND: CREATING MEANINGFUL INTERFAITH WORSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
But life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage—
To life everlasting.[1]

Brian cried as he said his daughter's name. He had previously told us about her death from AIDS but had never cried in our presence. We all sat in silence and held his sadness.

I was leading my fellow chaplains-in-training in worship at the hospice center on a Wednesday morning in July. As I prepared for the service, I thought carefully about what to include, not wanting anyone to feel uncomfortable or left out. In the group of six chaplain interns and one supervisor, I was the only Jew. I brought Jewish rituals and texts into the service and hoped that the common values at the core of each reading would somehow resonate with everyone in a meaningful way. Toward the end of the short morning service, I asked if anyone wanted to share the name of a loved one who had died. I explained the Jewish custom of saying Kaddish, the mourners' prayer. Though we did not say the actual Aramaic words of the Kaddish, I included the above poem from the prayer book. The idea of life as a sacred pilgrimage seemed like one to which everyone could relate.

I was overwhelmed by Brian's unexpected emotional response. I found that throughout the entire service, I was continuously surprised by the power of the texts and

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[1] Alvin Fine, "Birth is a Beginning" in in Elyse D. Frishman, ed. *Mishkan T'filah* (New York: CCAR Press, 2007), 575.

prayers, as I saw them through the eyes of my non-Jewish colleagues. Before this experience, when I prayed alongside other Jews, I had taken the familiar words and songs for granted. On that July morning, I saw everything anew.

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In the summer of 2007, my now husband and I drove across the country to Seattle, WA, where we each participated in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), a chaplain-training program, at two different hospitals in the Seattle area. I worked at Evergreen Medical Center, a community hospital just outside of the city. In my group of chaplains-in-training, there were two Episcopalians, one Catholic, one Presbyterian, and one Buddhist, in addition to our supervisor, a Methodist minister. Although I had grown up in a largely Christian environment, this was the first time that I was discussing religious and theological issues with non-Jews.

Despite my anxieties about discussing these topics in an unfamiliar setting, I found myself very comfortable from the very first week and through the end of the summer. Although we each came with different faiths and backgrounds, we started on common ground by sharing our personal stories. One at a time, we spoke about our lives up until that moment. We all shared our deepest sadnesses and our greatest triumphs, from losing loved ones and near-death experiences to children being born and new paths being discovered. I was moved by everyone's sensitivity and openness. Within our small group, we created a safe space to talk about our challenges, personal and theological. I came to learn about my colleagues' faith traditions and personal journeys, and through it all, I developed a deeper self-understanding.

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This extraordinary experience was the impetus for this thesis. I was inspired by the power of interfaith dialogue and learning. I started to imagine how that power could be harnessed to create meaningful interfaith worship. Currently, many congregations of different faiths are joining forces to work towards social justice through organizations like the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Interfaith Youth Core, as well as many local organizations like Manhattan Together and the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. How can interfaith worship honor these new sacred bonds? Congregations are also coming together to celebrate national holidays and mourn communal losses. How can these common worship experiences be reinvigorated to hold greater meaning?

In the chapters that follow, I begin to outline some of the preliminary steps in creating meaningful interfaith worship. Chapter One is focused on defining meaningful worship in general, as it is planned, led, and experienced in synagogues and churches. I address the goals and strategies that are essential to creating worship that extends beyond the sanctuary and into the reality of people's day-to-day lives. The second chapter discusses the importance of interfaith worship in our increasingly diverse society, and suggests various ways to take interfaith worship to a new level of engagement for all involved participants. Finally, in Chapter Three, I demonstrate the power of music to create a new kind of interfaith dialogue, concentrating on its effectiveness in the teaching of ideas and its ability to bring people together in a worship setting. This thesis is a first step towards creating sacred and sincere rituals that will foster rich and profound interfaith relationships.

CHAPTER 1

What is Meaningful Worship?

Meaningful worship is joining together within a community, blending voices in prayer and song, listening as engaged participants, finding a sense of respite in the midst of our chaotic lives, taking a mindful breath, connecting to God. It truly can be all of these things and many more, depending on whom you ask. These are only my answers. According to Lawrence A. Hoffman, "If public prayer is done with care, it successfully defines an alternative universe of reality for people adrift in an unrelenting secular stream of consciousness. It helps us suspend the disbelief of the secular sphere while we attend to the religious stories that our grandparents once believed without question."[1]

This "alternative universe" is increasingly critical these days, as our pace quickens with each new technological advance. We rarely turn everything off; emails and texts are always new and begging for a quick response. Multi-tasking cell phones have become addictions, the first thing we see in the morning and the last before we go to bed at night. Devices that promised to make our lives easier only complicate them, by eroding whatever time we once thought we had for ourselves. When we look at our heavily overlaid and color-coded schedules, it is hard to find worship anywhere: it is not a priority in our daily plan—there is just not enough time.

There could be, of course. What if worship helped us to appreciate the good in our lives? What if worship strengthened our resolve to get through the week with

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[1] Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 1999), 13.

confidence? What if worship provided a sense of comfort, knowing that there is a community praying together for one's personal well-being? Worship can provide these things, but only if it is planned and executed with great intention and attention. By intention, I mean thoughtfulness. By attention, I mean a continuous awareness of details. This thesis begins with the mandate to attend to prayer in an intentional way. It raises such issues as the roles of its various participants, the functions of ritual and prayer, and the melding of traditional content with innovative thinking.

We begin with the worship leaders — what does this role entail? Within Jewish worship, the worship leader was traditionally the cantor or *chazzan.*[2] The word *chazzan* comes from the root *ch.z.h* meaning "to see, or to oversee."[3] The original idea related more to overseeing, in that the chazzan in Mishnaic times oversaw the synagogue in its entirety. We hear also of a *chazzan ha'ir*, an overseer of the community. The chazzan did everything from arranging chairs to debating Christians on matters of religious difference.

The latter function returns full circle in this thesis, which later turns to interfaith worship—not as a matter of debate, but as a matter of finding meaning through prayerful interaction. We return to that topic later. For now, however, we can note a further implication of the root *ch.z.h.* It has been said that the idea of seeing, rather than overseeing matters liturgically, for "a service leader must have a vision of what kind of

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[2] It was only in the 18th-19th century that rabbis began to take part in leading worship, as influenced by Protestant ministers in Western Europe.
[3] Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 212.

worship atmosphere she or he wants to create."[4] The chazzan, then, is a leader of prayer who oversees the general goal of what worship is all about, and who then sees how best to accomplish what is intended. The overseeing is "intention"; the seeing is "attention."

The vision of the worship leader does not derive solely from his own desires; the chazzan is, in fact, not working alone. The two other terms used for this position of worship leader help to further elaborate the full nature of this role. The first is *sh'liach tsibur,* which translates to mean "messenger or envoy of the community." Although the leaders of prayer stand as individuals before a congregation, it is always with this goal in mind: to be fully aware of whom it is that he is representing. How does one bring about this awareness? According to the 16th century code of Jewish law, the Shulchan Aruch, humility is fundamental when taking on this position.[5] We can hear this idea echoed in the final term for worship leader, as it is discussed by Abraham Joshua Heschel:

> The right Hebrew word for cantor is *ba'al tefillah,* master of prayer. The mission of a cantor is to lead in prayer. He does not stand before the Ark as an artist in isolation, trying to demonstrate his skill or to display vocal feats. He stands before the Ark not as an individual, but with a congregation. He must identify himself with the congregation. His task is to represent as well as to inspire a community.[6]

In order to be a successful master of prayer, it is fundamental for the cantor to remain focused on what it is he is actually doing when he is leading worship. Above the ark in many synagogues is written the Hebrew quotation from the Talmud, "*Da lif'nei mi atah*

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[4] Josée Wolff, ed., "Bo-u L'fanav Birnanah: Come Into God's Presence with Singing—Worship Music Guidelines for Small Congregations," *Iv'du B'Simcha,* UAHC-CCAR (1999): 87.
[5] Encyclopedia Judaica, 1974 s.v. "Sh'liach Tsibur."
[6] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Vocation of the Cantor," *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1963), 244.

omed" or "Know before whom you stand."[7] As a worship leader, one must acknowledge that one is standing before God, but also before one's congregation, helping them pray. The community's presence and participation are key aspects of meaningful worship; the prayer leader must always stay attuned to this fact. "Once you know it's not about you, you can put the power back where it belongs."[8] Leading prayer involves the challenge of letting go of one's ego. Danny Maseng notes the great risk involved in this necessary act of release:

> After all is said and done—leading prayer IS stepping off a mountain top. If it isn't—it should be. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said that anyone who is not willing to make a fool of themselves in front of a congregation should not stand up in front of one. He also asked of God to render him speechless if he ever opened his mouth to speak Torah and his own clever words came out instead of words of Torah. It is scary business getting up in front of a congregation and at the end of the day, faith is all one has. Prepare as rigorously as you must, and then let go and step off the mountain top.[9]

These definitions— visionary, messenger, master of prayer—give us clear guidelines of what it means to be a successful worship leader; they also present great challenges. How does one become the kind of leader who stays continuously and selflessly aware of the needs of the community? How does one prepare thoroughly enough to feel ready to leap off the mountain? The first challenge is learning how to stand before a congregation, without getting caught up in the logistics of the service. As Heschel warns, "People expect the [clergy] to conduct a service: an efficient, expert

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[7] Ber. 28b. The original is in the plural, however.
[8] Jonathan Slater, class lecture, November 24, 2009.
[9] Danny Maseng, "Principles of Praying," handout from class presentation (used in "The Art of Creating Meaningful Worship," taught by Merri Lovinger Arian and Rabbi Nancy Weiner).

service. But efficiency and rapidity are no remedy against devotional sterility."[10] When faced with this expectation, and with the reality of a large crowd of people dependent on being led through prayer, it is natural for us to find our minds racing with questions like, "Which prayer comes next?," "Will I be able to start the piece in the right key to match what comes after it?," "Where should I stand when we take the Torah out of the ark?"

One of my rabbis taught me an important lesson in facing these questions and moving past them to find prayerfulness. During the summer after my first year of cantorial school in Israel, I led a small Saturday morning service at Temple Israel in Boston with Rabbi Elaine Zecher. As I sang the various prayers, I was hypersensitive to everything coming out of my mouth. I assumed that Rabbi Zecher was aware of each mistake I made along the way and was thinking, "Shouldn't she know more after a whole year of cantorial school?" After the service ended, I was alone in the hall with the rabbi and began to apologize for all of my mistakes. Rabbi Zecher responded, in a Heschel-like manner, by saying that leading prayer was not about a perfect performance. That would be the thought process when performing in a recital. In the case of worship, the focus should be on the prayers themselves, on the community, on bringing one's full self to what it is one is praying, whether spoken or sung.

Rabbi Zecher's words were indispensable to my development as a cantor. They helped me to understand what worship really is. This brings up the second challenge: how does a worship leader actually pray when leading a worship service? One helpful strategy is for a leader to have a developed prayer life outside of worship-leading. The

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[10] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (Aurora, NM: Aurora Press, 1998), 50.

Rabbis tell us, “One should never stand up to pray without appropriate seriousness. In fact, the pious ones of old used to meditate one hour before praying and would ask God to help them during that time to focus their hearts on the task.”[11] It makes sense that in order to find a sense of prayerfulness within all of the complexities of leading worship, one must have some experience praying oneself, without all of the pressures of standing up in front of a congregation. As Sally Morgenthaler, a writer and scholar of worship within Christian tradition, says,

> Before any of us can engage people in the authentic, interactive adoration of God, we must first all become worshipers. That may mean stepping down off the platform and getting our lives in sync with God. It may mean sitting in the pew and learning how to worship for the very first time. But, face facts we must. There is only One worthy of our praise (Revelations 4:11) and that One desires truth, not pretense: being, not performance.[12]

Finding one’s own prayer life can take many forms. It can mean sitting in the pews as a part of the congregation; it can also mean taking time to find private contemplative practices that provide meaning. The Methodist minister who was my hospital chaplain supervisor told me that every morning at 5:30, he walks about three miles to the waterfalls near his house. He says that when he returns, he often does not remember that he has walked. He was surprised at the power of this practice; it allowed him to be in touch with his inner self in a way he had never previously experienced. In the book *Mindful Jewish Living: Compassionate Practice*, Rabbi Jonathan Slater recommends meditation. He explains, “Mindfulness is a practice that helps us to pay attention with

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[11] M. Ber. 5:1.
[12] Morgenthaler, Sally, “Leading vs. Performance,” *Worship Leader Magazine*; available from www.ccli.com/worshipresources/Articles.cfm?itemID=23; Internet; accessed September 8, 2009.

both intention and awareness. It provides a method by which we can invite mindful awareness into every moment of our lives, as well as a means to sustain this effort." [13] How much more meaningful our worship leading can become if we are able to use these practiced sensibilities in order to change our focus from detailed logistics to the actual intention of our prayers! The leader of a congregation can serve as a model of finding ways of connecting to personal prayer, for "a vital congregation is one where all people—including the pastor—are growing members of an organic community of spiritual practice."[14]

This "organic community" is a vital part of a prayer leader's development. If leading worship is comparable to stepping off a mountain top, as Maseng depicted, then it is clearly something we should not attempt without the help of others. We turn to the Torah, to the figure of Moses, for guidance on how to share the responsibilities of leadership. As Moses led the Israelite people through the wilderness, he was at the helm, taking care of everything by himself. It took an outside observer, his father-in-law Jethro, to help him see that he could not shoulder this burden alone. Jethro responds to Moses' haughtiness, "The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."[15] With Jethro's help and advice, Moses begins to delegate his authority to new leaders.

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[13] Jonathan Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living: Compassionate Practice* (New York: Aviv Press, 2004), 5.
[14] Diana Butler Bass, "Intentionality, Practice, and Vitality;" available from www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=5280; Internet; accessed October 6, 2009.
[15] Exodus 18:17-18.

Similarly, it is tempting for worship leaders to assume that it is easier to do everything themselves than to share responsibility, that only they know how to really get things done. Clergy must recognize that it is not in their power alone to take on planning the worship of their community. An important piece of being a leader of worship is to mentor others in this leadership role, giving them varied opportunities to serve the community.[16] As pastor Tim Carson advises, "Involving many members in planning and leading worship has advantages. It reduces disconnect between worship planners and worshipers, and it prevents burnout. Outcomes are always better when worship is conceptualized, planned, and implemented with a broader team."[17] Building lay leaders helps share this great responsibility, but even more, it empowers these leaders to experience worship in a new way. Leading worship requires a certain amount of knowledge and preparation. Working through the planning stages of a worship service can help laypeople feel a greater sense of ownership of what is actually happening within the service. One of the lay leaders from my student pulpit, Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, commented on his experience of leading Shabbat services:

> It is humbling and very gratifying. I think about it as contributing to my community of worship. It has strengthened the extent to which I want the service to have a flow and familiar continuity, and it has attuned me to good and not good ways to add/subtract/teach things as part of the service. It has also helped me understand better the different pieces of the service and how they transition from one to another, allowing me to shift the focus of my intention along with the flow of the service. There is no substitute for learning more about the liturgy, the Hebrew, the structure and flow of the service and its historical origins. A lay leader should be someone who both can set an example and at the same time

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[16] Morgenthaler, "Leading vs. Performance."
[17] According to Tim Carson, senior pastor, in Joan Huyser-Honig, "Designing Worship Together: Advice that really works;" available from http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/design_worship.php; Internet; accessed November 13, 2009.

> simply guide rather than be too present -- like the difference between leading in song and performing.[18]

The idea of understanding the pieces of a service, how they fit together and flow into each other does indeed help to focus one's intention. In order to succeed in understanding this sense of flow, we must not only train new leaders, but we must also work closely *with* those around us, both our worship leading partners and our congregants. When leaders come together to plan worship, they draw on a greater wealth of knowledge; they gain the creativity of others, and also a sounding board for developing individual ideas. In their book *Designing Worship Together*, Norma deWaal Malefyt and Howard Vanderwell describe this idea of working together as follows:

> Collaboration is the word that best captures this experience of working together to craft worship. Collaborators are "co-laborers." They contribute from the field of their own gifts and passions. But they do not labor in isolation. Their labors are so interwoven that the final product is a composite. A group effort is genuinely the product of the entire group, not merely a modified solo plan.[19]

In my experience as a student cantor, I have often found myself creating this "modified solo plan" each week; I have struggled to find enough time to work with my worship leading partners to thoughtfully and collaboratively plan weekly services. However, during these past High Holidays at Temple Emanu-El of Dallas, I had quite the opposite experience. It was something of a dream collaboration for me. For the Rosh Hashanah evening and morning services, I was leading a smaller alternative service in a multi-purpose space for a group of about 300 young adults, while the standard service went on in the sanctuary for a significantly larger crowd. I met with two of the younger

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[18] Robert Elkin, member of Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, Texas, December 14, 2009.
[19] Norma deWaal Malefyt and Howard Vanderwell, *Designing Worship Together: Models and Strategies for Worship Planning*. (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), 3.

rabbis to plan these services, carefully considering who was going to be on the other side of our worship conversation. We talked through various parts of the service and figured out how to make this New Year's service meaningful and accessible for the congregation. The rabbis seemed to appreciate the knowledge I shared and also understood the power of music within the service — how those choices would have a great impact on the worship experience. We also discussed each decision: for example, why a congregational melody might make more sense than a solo in certain spots, or how one prayer should transition into the next. When we actually led the services together, it was a rich and profound experience — for me, knowing how we had worked together through the planning process, and for the congregation, experiencing the results of our careful planning.

One particular part of our worship was especially meaningful. One of the rabbis and I collaborated to reshape the *Unetaneh Tokef* , a complex and solemn *piyyut*, or poem, which is often broken up into separate musical pieces – to the point where I always thought these were distinct prayers. It was only after studying the High Holiday liturgy more closely in one of my classes that I realized the *Unetaneh Tokef* was a single unit, made up of many different ideas that flowed into each other. I wanted to treat it that way in the service. I also wanted to present its troubling themes of God as judge and jury, in charge of life and death, with great attention and care. Our congregation was made up of people who are craving deeper, more relevant conversations in their liturgy. I wanted to provide them with just that.

At the beginning of our modified *Unetaneh Tokef,* the rabbi gave an introduction to the poem, based on discussions we had had together about its meaning and how to

make it accessible to the congregation. I then began a *niggun* of a melody I had written, calm yet flowing, repeating it so that the congregation could get a full sense of it and thus be able to sing along. This then transitioned into a tapestry of music and readings, solo voice and congregational response, each carefully linked to the next. Before finishing the prayer, we again sang the *niggun* which is, in fact, the chorus of the melody I wrote for the very last section of this text. The words are sung in English, in order to allow people to hear what the beautiful poetry of this ancient prayer is actually saying. As the English words came to an end, we all joined together one last time to sing the wordless melody. It was the first time that I felt the full strength of this poetry. This collaborative experience was powerful, not only because the worship moment worked, but also because the planning, in itself, was actually prayerful. As Douglas Brouwer, senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, commented about his worship planning sessions, "There's no doubt that our work was creative, energizing, breathtakingly risky. I believe God's spirit was alive in our worship at the Wheaton church, because God's spirit was alive in our planning meetings."[20]

Not only is it essential for worship leaders to collaborate with each other when planning worship; it is necessary to consider how to collaborate with the congregation as well. Earlier, we saw how Moses provided a model of delegating authority. Moses and his sister Miriam also provide us with valuable models of how a leader can relate to his or her congregation. In his book *Moses and the Journey to Leadership*, Norman J. Cohen discusses the different ways that Moses and Miriam are leaders of the Jewish people.

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[20] According to Douglas Brouwer as quoted in Joan Huyser-Honig, "Designing Worship Together: Advice that really works."

Cohen looks closely at what actually happened just after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, when they celebrated with joy after having escaped the wrath of the Egyptians. In attempting to answer the question of who actually sang the *Song of the Sea*, we are able to understand what kinds of leaders Moses and Miriam were. Commonly, it was believed that Moses sings first and then Israel, in turn, echoes Moses's words. However, one midrash tells of the Israelite people asking Moses, with all of his knowledge and experience, if he will begin the song. He refuses, stating, "No, you shall begin for it is a greater mark of honor for God to be praised by the multitude than by one single human being." Thus, the people sing to God. It is only after they raise their voices together that Moses also praises God's name after witnessing the miracles of their escape.[21] Here, Moses has declared the power of the congregational voice. There are other traditions that say that instead of simply repeating Moses's sung refrain of *Shirat Hayam*, the "Song of the Sea," the Israelites actually add to it. Cohen explains, "Moses, for example, sings, 'I will sing unto the Lord, for He is highly exalted,' and the people repeat after him and then finish the line, 'I will sing unto the Lord, for He is highly exalted. The horse and rider He has thrown into the sea' (15:1)." Moses has thus encouraged the Israelites not only to add their own voices to the song, but to be creators of it as well. This action gives them a greater sense of engagement.[22]

Cohen also gives the example of Miriam to show an even more empowering example of leadership:

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[21] Norman J. Cohen, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006), 54.
[22] Ibid., 55.

> Miriam's song is clearly different from Moses's song. Moses's singing is described by the verb *yashir*: He sang his song to the people, while Miriam, by contrast, is said to literally 'respond' to [the women] (15:21). The word used is *ta'an*, which comes from the root *anah* (answer). Moses sings in front of the congregation, but Miriam reacts to those around her, responding to them and their songs… In contrast to Moses leading the people by himself, *Ashirah l'Adonai*, I will sing to God, Miriam urges her sisters to sing themselves, *Shiru l'Adonai*, 'Sing to God!' Miriam's model as a leader is clear: to enable those around her to find their own voices through which to praise God. They need not merely emulate or echo the leader's song. Great leaders understand that each person must be encouraged to raise his or her voice. (Cohen, 56-57)

Miriam presents us with an important model: one in which a leader enables his/her congregants to "find their own voices," to find their own ways to pray by constantly adapting how she leads to what the community needs in each moment. How do we emulate Miriam's leadership strategies? We must examine our current worship settings, acknowledging the progress we have made, and identifying ways to continue our worship development.

Worship has undergone great changes in the last fifty years. In 1954, Heschel wrote:

> We have developed the habit of praying by proxy. Many congregants seem to have adopted the principle of vicarious prayer. The rabbi or the cantor does the praying for the congregation. Men and women would not raise their voices, unless the rabbi issues the signal. Alas, they have come to regard the rabbi as a master of ceremonies.[23]

For some congregations, praying by proxy is still an ongoing habit; Miriam is nowhere to be found. However, in other communities, many congregants are searching for something more, something deeper; they want to be praying for themselves. When we look at our worship from a birds-eye view, it seems that our worship is indeed set up in a

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[23] Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 50.

frontal manner, enabling this kind of "vicarious prayer." The congregants sit in the "audience" and watch the clergy-people "performing" on "stage." Of course, we give each of these words in quotations different names, but as an outsider looking in, this is what our worship services must look like. The clergy have been trained to lead prayer; they have thought about what the words mean, and how the prayers fit together; they have a full understanding of the structure of the service. It is easy for congregants to see the clergy-person as the "master of ceremonies." About ten years ago, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) created a guide for reinvigorating worship entitled *Iv'du B'Simcha*, which, unlike Heschel's view, portrays a more Miriam-like leadership model. It describes worship as follows:

> Jewish worship is a carefully choreographed, multilayered experience that invites both reflection and communication, with a special emphasis on dialogue, between individuals and God; between prayer leaders and congregants; and between community members. Once we recognize this inherent dialogue, it becomes easier to see the need for partnership—a collaborative spirit— between clergy and congregants, who together are charged with nurturing communal worship.[24]

Acknowledging this great shift, which has come even further in the ten years since this URJ guide was written, we now ask, How are we creating this dialogue? How can we continue to help congregants to feel like they are engaged and essential members of our community worship team? We must take the key elements of worship, such as ritual and prayer, and infuse them with relevance and innovation, helping to further involve our congregants in the worship experience.

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[24] *Ivdu B'simcha*, 10.

Ritual is defined as a "series of actions performed according to a prescribed order."[25] We often take our rituals for granted, rarely stopping to appreciate all that they are capable of providing. Hoffman helps us to see their inherent grandeur: "Ritual helps us minimize our dependence on chance. It arranges our life into relatively small packages of moments that matter."[26] A rabbi with whom I used to work told me a story of one of his congregants, Mark, a fifty-year-old man who had only just recently rediscovered Judaism after his second wife, Abby, had decided to convert and brought him reluctantly with her to services. Mark had lost his first wife at a young age to cancer and had married Abby about five years ago. At the beginning of his relationship with Abby, he encountered uncontrollable outbursts of emotion connected to the death of his first wife. Mark had never properly grieved over that enormous loss. As he started attending services, he began to say the *Kaddish*, the mourners' prayer, for his first wife. He found great comfort in this ritual; it was a set time each week where he could take a moment to grieve for her. After attending services for a number of months, Mark no longer experienced the outbursts; he was now able to acknowledge the toll this huge loss had taken on him and mourn in a more controlled manner. Ritualizing the major and minor events and emotions of our lives can help give us a sense of structure amidst a chaotic world, a structure that allows us to appreciate the fleeting moments passing by. Hoffman explains, "Religion is the category of life's pursuits that best integrates these

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[25] New Oxford American Dictionary, online entry.
[26] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer*, 17.

highs and lows, and religious ritual is how we structure sad and happy moments so that they occur within a framework that we understand and appreciate."[27]

Although rituals can provide much needed meaning in our lives, one of the great challenges in creating meaningful worship is how to ensure they remain relevant. How can we keep them from becoming stale? The word "ritual" itself carries much stigma, as Hoffman states,

> Unfortunately the word 'ritual' has taken on a negative connotation… Of course, rituals that once mattered deeply to the people who kept them can degenerate into sterility... The script is played out, but the actors' minds and hearts are elsewhere… The ritualistic cues once pregnant with meaning are now vacant words, empty gestures, vacuous activity.[28]

As mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter, meaningful worship allows us to escape the "secular sphere" and "attend to the religious stories that our grandparents once believed without question." However, how do we infuse these stories and these rituals with new life? How do we make them relevant for our congregants today? We can think of these fixed rituals as *keva*, which Hoffman defines as "the structural fixity, the rhetorical rules for prayer, the fixed succession of themes that inevitably constitute a service no matter what words were used." When we think of how to approach the *keva* of our service, we must remember the *kavanah*, the "creativity or spontaneity... [that] comes through inner concentration by each worshiper."[29] Rabbi Hoffman confirms, "Religious rituals can still speak to people. Among other things, they can heal our aching souls,

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[27] Ibid., 25.
[28] Ibid., 19-20.
[29] Hoffman, as quoted in *Ivdu B'Simcha*, 34.

provide us with celebration, create closure on our past, and move us to live meaningful lives. Religious moments are as vital now as they have ever been."[30]

In order to ensure the meaningfulness of our worship, the ability to find *kavanah* or intention within a structure of *keva,* of our fixed prayers, we must be ready to create new rituals, by adapting old ones to fit new needs. We also must infuse our old rituals with new meaning, with new associations and contexts to make them relevant to our congregants' lives.

An example of the former: When Cantor Angela Buchdahl's daughter was born, she wanted to create some kind of ceremony similar to a *bris,* that would occur eight days after the baby's birth, but that would be fitting for a baby girl, a *simchat bat*. She created a ritual based loosely on various Jewish traditions: the seven traditional wedding blessings and the biblical custom of washing a guest's feet as a sign of hospitality. Cantor Buchdahl picked seven blessings she wanted for her daughter Rose's life: infinite generosity, strength and valor, boundless hope and sense of possibility, wit and humor, intelligence and creativity, compassion and healing, unconditional love. She then asked seven women in her life, each of whom embodied one of these blessings, to offer their blessing and pour water over the new baby's feet. Cantor Buchdahl spoke about this ritual with great passion, commenting that "it was one of the happiest days of my life. I felt exquisitely aware of my many blessings."[31] She also noted that everyone who was there still talks about this moment.

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[30] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer,* 36.
[31] Interview with Cantor Angela Buchdahl, December 21, 2009.

This example highlights the importance of innovation in creating new rituals based on ancient traditions. It also brings to light the idea that tangible non-verbal actions can sometimes be an essential element in making a ritual meaningful. Though Cantor Buchdahl's friends and family may not remember the details of all the words spoken at this ceremony, they distinctly remember the tangible act of pouring water on this new baby's feet. We experience the power of non-verbal ritual action in the smashing of the glass at a wedding or the shoveling of dirt onto the grave at a funeral. We must acknowledge that words are not our only form of communication. In fact, at times, they can actually get in the way. We sometimes assume that explaining rituals and prayer will help people to understand them more deeply. However, we must be cautious. Heschel warns, "Too often, so-called explanation kills inspiration."[32] So, if we cannot rely on explaining the background of our prayers and rituals in order for congregants to find greater understanding within them, what can we do to infuse our rituals with new life?

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann and Cantorial Soloist Lisa B. Segal, of Kolot Chayeinu in Brooklyn, NY, sit down together before each worship service and talk about what they have been thinking in their own personal lives, but they broaden their view to consider what is in the news; what is on their congregants' minds? These questions help to inform and enrich their worship services. The answers lead to different choices about musical mood, about the shape the service will take, a fresh view each week.

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[32] Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 80.

In just such ways, many worship leaders are continuing to find new ways to make worship more relevant to their congregants' experiences. Unfortunately, many American Jews have not been exposed to such efforts; they have learned not to look to Judaism for greater meaning in their lives. The bottom line is that their Judaism is not a central piece of their identity. Many Jewish children in religious school, preparing to become bar and bat mitzvah, consider Judaism as just another extra-curricular activity. As Rabbi Michael Strassfeld comments, "The truth is that most Jews are proud of their Jewish identity, but many have marginalized it, reducing it to the leisure-time activities of Shabbat or to an occasional moment."[33] Strassfeld believes that at the heart of this issue is the fact that "many people do not feel comfortable praying or do not really believe in prayer."[34]

When I worked as a chaplain-in-training, I remember being asked by a non-Jewish patient if I would pray for her. This meant creating a spontaneous prayer out of the various things I had heard her say as we had talked together. Although this is a practice known to Jewish tradition (in I Samuel, Hannah prays the words of her heart hoping to have a child), it rarely occurs in present-day Judaism. In my own experience, I had never before improvised a prayer on the spot, and I was overwhelmed by panic and pressure. What did it mean to pray from my heart and not from a prayer *book*? Do our congregants ever ask this question of themselves? Do they ever relate the fixed prayers in our prayerbook to the prayers of their hearts?

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[33] Michael Strassfeld, "Reconstructing Prayer," *The Reconstructionist* 71, no. 1 (Fall 2006), 35.
[34] Ibid., 33.

Worship leaders can and should be guides on this journey of questioning; they can support their congregants and let them know that each individual's path is unique, with its own pit stops and pacing. Clergy can work on creating safe spaces for these kinds of conversations that many people have never even contemplated. Of course, not everyone is looking for this kind of conversation. As Hoffman notes,

> There are plenty of Jews (and Christians too) who do not expect that worship will be spiritual. They go to talk to Schwartz, not God. Still others go out of habit: 'What else do you do on Shabbat morning?' Or out of obligation: 'This is just something Jews do—like giving charity and keeping holidays.' The idea that there is a theological reason to pray or that the presence of God ought to be manifest in worship never arises.[35]

But more and more people are looking for more than that. Hoffman himself derides this old "ethnic" approach to prayer as hardly satisfying for our time and place. Worship leaders are therefore increasingly required to be challenging to their congregants, promoting difficult questions and engaging people in meaningful conversations. Rabbi Strassfeld suggests that Judaism can play a fundamental role for American Jews in finding greater meaning in their lives:

> While America is the dominant civilization, let Jewish civilization supply teachings that will bring meaning to our lives. What gives purpose to my life? When I look back over my story, what gives me a sense of a life well-lived? When I reflect upon my faults and foibles, what provides me with insights and wisdom to help me grow spiritually? When I face the inevitable challenges and losses, what grants me comfort? When I feel existentially alone, what gives me the sense that I am part of the unity underlying the cosmos?[36]

This idea is not limited to Judaism; of course, religion in general can provide greater meaning by asking these kinds of questions. Everyone should be enabled to discover

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[35] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer*, 9.
[36] Strassfeld, "Reconstructing Prayer," 35.

what religion in general and prayer in particular mean on an individual and personal level. The assumptions and stereotypes of what it means to pray, to believe in God, to be "religious" must be stripped away; people should talk about these ideas beginning with their own experiences. If there are doubts along the way, clergy leaders must let their congregants know that this is not only acceptable, but, in fact, encouraged. The prayer book of the Jewish Reform movement, *Mishkan T'filah* includes the following reading by humanist minister, Kenneth L. Patton:

> Doubting is but the forefront of faith,
> a faith in the infinite growth
> of an unbound creation.
>
> A doubting age is one of restlessness
> and discontent with what is current;
> a doubt is an idea that is still alive.
>
> To doubt that the past has uncovered all things
> is to express faith
> that many things are still to be uncovered.
>
> To doubt that we have grown
> to our full stature and knowledge
> is to express faith that we may develop
> into beings of such power and dignity
> that we cannot as yet imagine what shall be.[37]

Worship leaders can help their congregants to feel confident in their religious identity by finding ways to connect traditional prayer to what really matters in our lives; they can work together with their congregants to seek out a daily practice that fits each individual's needs. As Reuven Hammer says, "Prayer should be at the heart of life and

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[37] Kenneth L. Patton, as cited *Mishkan T'filah*, 405.

not mere trimming."[38] Finally, worship should extend beyond our synagogues and churches. As Hoffman writes,

> 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.[39]

Liturgical success requires that worship leaders be intentional, in the way they plan services in collaboration with others, and in the way they find prayerfulness in every ritual and text. Worship leaders must also be attentive to the changing needs of community, by creating relevant and innovative dialogues in which every congregant's voice is heard. In the next chapter, we investigate how the planning of interfaith worship can achieve similar goals to those mentioned above. In an interfaith worship setting, many different voices are waiting for an invitation to pray together. How can worship leaders ignite this sacred conversation?

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[38] Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer* (New York: Shocken Books, 1995), 29.
[39] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer,* 241.

CHAPTER 2

Finding Meaning in Interfaith Worship

Bringing intention and attention to the planning and conducting of worship can help congregants to feel connected to their inner selves as well as to each other. How can we now implement these same tools to plan meaningful *interfaith* worship?

Interfaith worship for its own sake is still relatively rare. It is common enough for many synagogues and churches to plan at least one interfaith service each year, honoring American holidays such as Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Day, or specifically Jewish events like Holocaust Remembrance Day. But "worship in common," as Lawrence A. Hoffman calls it, is a relatively recent innovation. "Until modern times, neither Judaism nor Christianity had any conceivable notion of worship in common—worship, by definition, being designed to keep each other out, rather than to include each other."[1] In addition, interfaith worship planning has not often been taught in seminaries.[2] "Theological schools train [their students] to minister to their own flocks, feeding them with home-grown spiritual nourishment."[3] But as religious communities in a secular society discover they have much in common, we can expect that the idea of praying together will increase. In response to this growing need, and recognizing the gaps in the training of worship leaders, it is my goal in this chapter to elucidate some of the foundational principles of interfaith worship, and thereby indicate the ways that worship intentionality in general can apply here as well. In order to make interfaith worship

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[1] Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Worship in Common," *Cross Currents*, Spring 1990, 9.
[2] Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 23.
[3] Hoffman, "Worship in Common," 5.

meaningful, we must look more deeply into why coming together as an interfaith community is important, what our goals should be within these worship experiences, and what the best methods to achieve them are.

As Americans in 2010, we are living in a time and place unlike any other. According to Diana Eck, professor of comparative religions at the Harvard Divinity School, "In the past thirty years, the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth."[4] For that matter, people all over the world, not just America, rely on religion, instead of nationality, as a source of identity.[5] George Weigel, American Catholic writer and scholar, has written, the "unsecularization of the world is one of the dominant social factors of life in the late twentieth century."[6] Some respond negatively to these ideas. Samuel Huntington, longtime political science professor at Harvard University, has claimed that civilizations are "inherently and inevitably in conflict with each other," based on their religious and cultural affiliations.[7] His thesis emphasizes the idea that "we are too different to live together in peace, so we had better keep our distances from each other. Otherwise, violent coannihilation is inevitable."[8] Does a deeper embracing of one's own religion imply a resistance to relate positively to others of different religious and cultural backgrounds?

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[4] Eck, *A New Religious America*, 4.
[5] Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993; available from http://history.club.fatih.edu.tr/103%20Huntington%20Clash%20of%20Civilizations%20full%20text.htm; Internet; accessed on January 4, 2010.
[6] As quoted in Ibid.
[7] As paraphrased by Eboo Patel "Action through Service—From Shared Values to Common Action," in Bud Heckman, ed. *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2008), 114.
[8] Ibid, 114.

Princeton sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow presents another perspective: "Christians, Muslims, Jews, and the rest of America's religious diversity are all riding together [in an elevator;] we are increasingly aware of the other people around us, but we're doing just about everything we can to avoid real interaction."[9] In this case, we might not annihilate each other, but we will not be getting along very well either. Wuthnow's imagery exemplifies mere tolerance, just the first logical step towards coexisting with diverse neighbors. Tolerance is defined as "the ability or willingness to accept something, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with."[10] "Although tolerance is no doubt a step forward from intolerance," says Professor Eck, "it does not require new neighbors to know anything about one another. Tolerance can create a climate of restraint but not one of understanding. Tolerance alone does little to bridge the chasms of stereotype and fear."[11]

Between the extremes of Huntington's and Wuthnow's views, and beyond the strategy of mere tolerance is the idea of "religious pluralism." For some, the word "pluralism" carries much stigma -- linked with ideas of the melting pot and multiculturalism to imply an "unprincipled relativism and therefore moral decay."[12] The dictionary, however, defines "pluralism" more openly as "a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, etc., coexist."[13] From this view, pluralism does not seem so different from tolerance. In any event, whatever our

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[9] As quoted by Patel in Ibid., 118.
[10] New Oxford American Dictionary, online entry.
[11] Eck, *A New Religious America*, 70.
[12] Ibid., 69.
[13] New Oxford American Dictionary, online entry.

initial associations, there is a new kind of pluralism on the rise. Eboo Patel, executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, explains:

> Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.[14]

In order to achieve religious pluralism, each group must step out of its comfort zone and "proactively cooperate." This new definition focuses on action. Religious groups must break Wuthnow's elevator silence and get off on the same floor; they are destined for a longer conversation. Eck defines pluralism as "the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences."[15] Acknowledging our real and profound differences and exploring them are necessary steps in moving forward toward more genuine relationships and understanding. Patel continues by explaining that pluralism is not an automatic tendency. It, like proper worship, requires intentionality:

> Pluralism is an intentional commitment that is imprinted through action. It requires deliberate engagement with difference, outspoken loyalty to others, and proactive protection in the breach. You have to *choose* to step off the faith line onto the side of pluralism, and then you have to make your voice heard. To follow Robert Frost, it is easy to see the death of pluralism in the fire of a suicide bombing. But the ice of silence will kill it just as well.[16]

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14 Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), xv.
15 Eck, *A New Religious America*, 70.
16 Patel, *Acts of Faith*, xix.

Religious pluralism—as a call for active engagement—is a fundamental concept when planning interfaith worship, and something that should be considered in every step of the planning process.

How, given these concerns, does one begin to plan interfaith worship services? When it comes to the "how-tos" of planning interfaith worship, two guides stand out as forerunners. The first is *Guidelines for Designing a Multifaith Prayer Service*, put together by Paul McKenna for Scarboro Missions, a Catholic organization in Canada dedicated, in part, to building "a family of faiths, sharing interpersonal, intercultural and interreligious relationships."[17] This online document presents a thorough overview of the basic elements needed to create interfaith worship, elements like respectful presence, inclusivity, balance, diversity, and other aesthetic considerations. The guide provides an inspiring list of possible themes for interfaith services, such as earth, pilgrimage, sacred spaces, and creation, just to name a few. In a discussion of "faith group representatives," the guide suggests that "each participating representative is free to pray, to read from sacred texts, or to perform ritual or chant from his or her tradition."[18]

The second guide that came highly recommended from various interfaith sources is the *Guidelines for Interfaith Prayer Services,* put together by the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington and updated in the book *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook.* This guide emphasizes that "it is

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[17] Paul McKenna, "Guidelines for Designing an Multifaith Prayer Service;" available from http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Interfaith_dialogue/multifaith_prayer_service.php; Internet; accessed February 13, 2008. This guide was recommended by Rabbi Justus Baird, director of the Center for Multifaith Education at Auburn Theological Seminary.
[18] McKenna, "Guidelines for Designing an Multifaith Prayer Service."

important to draw on the universal and unifying aspects of our various traditions and to use prayers, readings, litanies, hymns, and other elements of a service that lift up the commitment to peace and justice in the world."[19] The guide warns numerous times about excluding anyone in the planning process. This can be a challenging task, when faced with differing views on theology, language, ritual, and prayer. In response to this challenge, this guide presents several examples of interfaith worship settings, as well as a list of appropriate hymns.

These guides provide many helpful strategies for creating interfaith worship. I want to suggest adding to them the concept of *pluralism as active engagement*. Is it enough for each participant to stand at a lectern and present a prayer, text, or song from her tradition? How will an interfaith community perceive these rituals? If relevance is a concern in regular worship, where the rituals are often familiar, how much more important is this concern when the community witnesses, and is asked to participate in, unfamiliar rituals of different faiths! Through my own experience and in talking with others, I have found that many interfaith worship services come across as diluted, as a "superficial lovefest."[20] Given the categories laid out here so far, we can now understand why. These types of services convey the approaches of tolerance and coexistence instead of pluralism and engagement. Tolerant coexistence is the old model of interfaith accord; the new one is pluralistic engagement. In this new way of thinking, the service is more than just a *symbol* of brotherhood; it becomes instead an actual enactment of it. People

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[19] Rev. Dr. Clark Lobenstine, "Dialogue through Observation and Participation—Interfaith Prayer Services," in Heckman, *InterActive Faith*, 83.
[20] Anonymous student rabbi, after taking part in a Community Thanksgiving Celebration, November 22, 2009.

coming together in interfaith worship can engage and learn from those who are different from them, strengthening the community that exists beyond our synagogue and church walls.

Reverend Bud Heckman, editor of *Interactive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook* comments on the wariness many people bring to interfaith worship: "For a person who strives to bring people of different faiths together, I realize that many good people of faith fear the idea of 'interfaith' —even in its intracommunity sense—because they are preconditioned to believe that it will dilute the true sense of their own tradition."[21] Hoffman adds an even sharper objection that is commonly brought against interfaith worship:

> There are those who object in principle to common worship. They find it inauthentic, trivial, or worse. Casting about for a biblical image, they charge worshipers in common with uttering pure Babel—another occasion that featured different peoples intent on a common task, but not a good one, with the predictable result that their speech became nonsense. So too, they say, our prayers together, though grammatically and syntactically unassailable, are really not proper prayers, not before God, anyway, and not even in the company of our coreligionists who still understand as prayer only the old-time religion thick with accents of yesterday.[22]

The success of an interfaith worship service, according to the guides mentioned above, requires removing many particularistic elements of worship, deleting much of the heart and soul of specific traditions, so that no one feels excluded. But does anyone feel truly included and engaged? It is no wonder that many leaders refuse to call this "prayer."

This past November, I attended a Jewish-Christian Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration that was more of a concert than a worship service. The evening event

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[21] Heckman, *InterActive Faith,* 7.
[22] Hoffman, "Worship in Common," 17.

featured the cantors of the temple, the temple choirs, and a secular children's choir singing generic songs of gratitude and brotherhood, *Hinei Ma Tov* and *O Give Thanks*. Perhaps that is why it was called a "celebration" and not a service. For me, the most meaningful moment of the experience was the time before the performance began, when I began talking with a Hindu man sitting next to me. His daughter was singing in the choir, and this was his first time seeing her perform. He told me about his own religion, how he often travels alone to his Hindu temple, since his wife is Christian. I enjoyed hearing about his religious experience, and sharing a little about myself. I also was moved by the very end of the service when we sang *America the Beautiful*. It was the only time that the congregation was invited to sing. I felt a surge of joy as I listened to the voice of a woman behind me, singing out with energy. It seemed a missed opportunity that this was the only point in the celebration that our voices all came together.

How do we plan a different kind of interfaith worship that not only does not offend but also engages everyone present? In his work as the founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, Eboo Patel believes that the starting point for interfaith meeting is establishing shared values. Patel comments on past scholarship which has observed that "the world's religious and moral traditions all articulate varieties of certain shared, universal values. These are grand values such as compassion, justice, and service, as well as more tangible values such as hospitality, stewardship of the environment, and charity."[23] Many of the interfaith services mentioned above draw on this idea of universal values. Every tradition has some kind of general prayer or text

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[23] Patel in Heckman, *InterActive Faith*, 124.

about gratitude, for example. However, shared values are even more compelling when they are explained through the distinct lens of one person's tradition. "What is precisely so interesting about the phenomenon of shared values," Patel notes, "is that they require the unique language of each of our religions and moral traditions to infuse them with true meaning and significance."[24] Patel brings together young people of different faiths, and asks them, "How does *your* religion speak to this value?" Explaining his vision, he continues, "We are showing young people that religions have powerful things in common, but they come to those shared values through their own paths. Each religion has something unique to say about universal values through its particular set of scriptures, rituals, and heroes." [25]

The second strategy that Patel uses in his work with interfaith youths is storytelling. Stanley Hauerwas, a Duke Professor and theological ethicist, proposes that story lies at the heart of every religion, and depicts religious communities as "narrative communities."[26] Not only do our religious traditions provide us with a multitude of stories—concerning the creation of the world, the development of our religions, the struggles our people have endured—but we as individuals provide our own stories related to our religious experience. "What if I am not confident in retelling the stories of my tradition?" one might ask. Patel responds, "Young people in this methodology are not required to be scholars of their traditions; the expertise from which they speak is their own life experiences, of which they are the world's foremost experts."[27] There is great

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[24] Ibid., 124.
[25] Patel, *Acts of Faith*, 166-167.
[26] Stanley Hauerwas, as quoted by Patel in Heckman, *InterActive Faith*, 125.
[27] Patel in Heckman, *InterActive Faith*, 127.

power in sharing one's personal and religious experience. The act of telling another person one's story validates one's own experience; it requires clarity and focus which often leads to greater self-understanding.

Shared values and storytelling should have a designated place at the planning table of interfaith worship. As mentioned in chapter one, meaningful worship derives from careful attention to the sanctity of the planning meeting. Worship leaders of different faiths can begin by sharing their own stories, answering questions like:

- What does it mean to me to be a leader of worship?
- What does prayer mean to me on a personal level?
- How has my own religion developed as a result of working with leaders from other religions?
- What are the stories from my own tradition that drive me forward each day?

Leaders can discuss their own rituals, and explain their personal significance. As Hoffman notes, "It is always tempting to judge other people's rituals by the standards that we have for our own, but it is wiser to ask the people involved in the ritual what counts for success."[28] It is the ritual of the other than demands our care; listening intently is the only way to arrive at what it means.

Unfortunately, there is much work ahead. The interfaith movement is in its early stages. Heckmen remarks that "in the grand scheme of things, the interfaith movement in the United States is still in its infancy or, at best, an awkward toddler."[29] Although we are seeing greater self-identification with religion, people are lacking a larger, peripheral,

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[28] Hoffman, *Art of Public Prayer*, 27.
[29] Heckman, *InterActive Faith*, 9.

view. Most Americans have little knowledge of religions other than their own. As Eck observes,

> Americans, on the whole, have a high degree of religious identification, according to every indication of the Gallup polls, and yet a very low level of religious literacy. Beginning to root out the stereotypes and prejudices that form the fault lines of fracture is critical for a society that has absorbed so much difference, with so little understanding of our differences.[30]

Just as people have little to no knowledge of the faiths surrounding them, many do not understand how their own faith relates to other religious traditions. Patel comments on this growing phenomenon among American youths,

> The problem is that today's youths—Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, or whatever—no longer live in the so-called 'banquet hall' of their faith communities… They are coming into contact with kids from different backgrounds all the time. If they don't have a way of understanding how their faith relates to the Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Evangelicals, and others that they spend most of the lives around, then there's a good chance that their religious identities will atrophy.[31]

How can clergy help their congregants, young and old, to develop a clearer religious identity? How do we imbue each individual with a sense of confidence in her own religious background, while at the same time giving her the tools to understand who she is in the context of others? Is this something that can take place, at least in part, in our worship settings? As previously discussed, meaningful worship requires imparting a sense of relevance, showing our communities how our faith traditions apply beyond Friday, Saturday, or Sunday worship experiences, how they in fact extend into real life.

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[30] Eck, *A New Religious America*, 70.
[31] Patel, *Acts of Faith*, 165.

The time has come to make a change, to talk about interfaith worship in ways that take us away from the watered-down norm. Interfaith worship must organically develop out of dialogue, out of shared values and storytelling. What if synagogues paired their Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration Service with a month of programming and conversations planned together with the neighboring church or mosque? Religious school programming those weeks would include dialogue between youths from both communities, sharing common values, telling their stories, getting to know each other in a faith-based setting. Adult education programs could include similar conversations, led by clergy and lay leaders from both communities, beginning with stories before jumping too quickly into theological debate. Dialogues could inspire creativity, as described here by a Reconstructionist Jew who began meeting regularly with an interfaith Bible study group:

> By developing boundaries that respect our traditions and that allow us to gain an appreciation and an understanding of each other, we have begun to interact creatively in ways that are not pareve in the style of the 'melting-pot.' Our shared experiences have been planned and designed to respect each tradition, at the same time that they affirm the validity of the other. In this dialogue, it has been just as important to acknowledge and honor our differences as our similarities. Differences clearly pose greater challenges to all of us, but if we do not adequately honor them, we are not really in dialogue.[32]

Just as these in-depth and challenging study sessions led to creative interactions, this month of new conversations and learning would culminate in a creative worship service —people who had now spent time learning about and from each other could come

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[32] Cy Swartz, "When Jews Celebrate with Christians," *The Reconstructionist*, 59:2 (Fall, 1994): 45.

together in a sacred space and celebrate more deeply what it means to be thankful. The stories that they shared throughout their weeks together could be woven into the service.

Of course, communities may not be able to accommodate the kind of planning that would go into a month of community building. Is it possible to achieve meaningful interfaith worship without this kind of preparation? Possibly, although not ideally. Another suggestion, then, is that we look carefully within our texts to help inspire and invigorate us as we strive to reach these goals. In his article, *Worship in Common*, published in 1990, Hoffman brings to light a biblical passage that shows us a first step in creating interfaith worship. Commenting on his own personal view on how to approach this kind of worship, Hoffman writes,

> I … prefer as my text, Exodus 12:38. When the Israelites left Egypt, "a mixed multitude went out with them." Surely the Exodus is the way to freedom, a road we travel still. And we, the generations struggling with the gift of common prayer, are the "mixed multitude," released from a more recent bondage, the slavery that refused to look outside ourselves for soulmates, or to recognize any but our own as "Brother, Sister."[33]

Although this passage, as interpreted by Hoffman, implies a recognition of shared experience, it shows no evidence of interaction between this mixed multitude. This varied group all came from the horrors of bondage, but there is no sign that they are sharing stories, learning about each other's experiences and traditions. Unfortunately, interfaith worship nowadays still holds onto this model. The universalistic service, that mainly seeks to not offend anyone, parallels this idea of traveling together, but does not necessarily promote an interfaith response to one another in any deeper way. The "mixed multitude" does not take interfaith worship far enough.

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[33] Hoffman, "Worship in Common," 17.

I suggest Leviticus 19:33-34, "When strangers reside in your land, you shall not wrong them. The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."[34] These verses present a model of going beyond coexisting. Here, not only do participants share a common bond in knowing what it feels like to be a stranger, but they are encouraged to get to know each other. What might it mean to love the stranger as yourself? It calls on us to hear the stranger's stories, understand how he sees the world, know him so that he is no longer a stranger.

Although I would leave it to Muslim participants to determine a parallel proof text from the *Qur'an*, I mention a potential candidate here, just for illustrative purposes. Imagine the power of using: "O mankind, We have created you male and a female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another."[35]

Working towards "knowing one another" is necessarily impactful. Most people who have engaged in interfaith dialogue, who have shared stories, and learned what makes each other tick, often report a deepening of their self-understanding. Reuven Firestone, HUC-JIR professor of Medieval Jewish and Islamic Studies, commented on a recent program,

> We just finished a pilot program in which Jews and Muslims are paired and study together in a chevrutah [Hebrew term for a pair of study partners] to look at parallel material in the Qur'an and Bible, with guidance along the way. We had students from age 22 to their late sixties, men and women, Jews and Muslims. It turned out to be a phenomenal program. The deepest change students experienced was in their self-understanding. They certainly gained a better sensitivity to the

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[34] Translation taken from Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, ed. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 710.
[35] Qur'an 49:13, as quoted by Patel, *Acts of Faith,* 140.

> other religion, but widely reported a deeper engagement in their own religious traditions.[36]

Similarly, Professor Eck reflects on her own experience studying different faiths,

> Through the years I have found my own faith not threatened, but broadened and deepened by the study of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh traditions of faith. And I have found that only as a Christian pluralist could I be faithful to the mystery and the presence of the one I call God. Being a Christian pluralist means daring to encounter people of very different faith traditions and defining my faith not by its borders, but by its roots.[37]

Eck makes a fundamental point as she defines her faith "by its roots." Earlier, we read of the Reconstructionist Jew who learned in his interfaith bible study group that boundaries between faiths led to a richer and more creative sharing of texts and traditions. Although his experiences demonstrated fruitful results, I am curious as to what might have been accomplished if the emphasis had been shifted from boundaries to roots. Would he have felt a deeper connection with his own tradition? Stories and traditions get at roots, not boundaries.

In the following paragraphs, I illustrate successful models of meaningful interfaith worship that use these methods of shared storytelling to connect people to each other in deeper and more pluralistic ways, and to enable moments of enriched self-understanding.

This past October, I was invited to take part in an interfaith service at Union Theological Seminary (UTS), a Presbyterian seminary on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. This service was the first that was organized by the UTS Interfaith Caucus,

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[36] "Embracing the Challenge: Reuven Firestone on Jewish-Muslim Dialogue, An Interview by Joshua Stanton" *Interreligious Dialogue*; available from http://irdialogue.org/articles/on-campus-articles/embracing-the-challenge-reuven-firestone-on-jewish-muslim-dialogue-an-interview-by-joshua-stanton/; Internet; accessed January 7, 2010.

[37] Eck, *A New Religious America*, 23.

and was planned to honor Simchat Torah, which had occurred the day before. I have to admit that I was hesitant to join the planning committee; I was nervous about the time commitment and the responsibilities involved. However, Jenn, a friend of mine, was the co-chair of the committee and convinced me to be a part of it. She was the only Jewish student from UTS participating in this service. There was one planning meeting a week before the service, followed by emails regarding logistics. The planning group consisted of about eight UTS students, one rabbinic student from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and me, representing Hebrew Union College.

At the planning meeting, Megan, the JTS student, began by explaining Simchat Torah to everyone. The UTS students sat at the table, open and curious, wanting to learn about this Jewish tradition and make connections to their own experience. I appreciated hearing Megan explain Simchat Torah in this setting—it was a unique experience, for we do not often hear an explanation of our traditions aimed at an audience who comes to the table with a relatively blank slate. Because this was an unfamiliar holiday for most of the UTS students, I was not assured that this would be a successful and meaningful worship experience. I did not understand how the non-Jewish members of the planning committee would be able to participate in a way that was meaningful for them. How were they going to connect to a holiday about which they knew so little?

The service was held in the James Chapel at UTS, and the students had moved the one Christological symbol off to the side where it was no longer visible. The chairs were set up in a circle in the center of the space. The service began with Jenn leading a call to worship. I was immediately moved by the earnestness of her words. When I had first

seen the phrase "call to worship" on the program, I thought I might feel uncomfortable because of its Christian connotations. However, Jenn's call was earthy and real:

> This is a call to worship.
>
> I call you. I am here as the co-chair of the Union Theological Seminary Interfaith Caucus, welcoming my community and colleagues, fellow seminarians and religious leaders from Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College.
>
> You call you. Something brought you here to chapel today. Need, obligation, habit, longing--something bigger than you pushes you and pulls you into this space. Heed this call and be here now.
>
> Tradition calls you. Today we celebrate Simchat Torah, when the final sounds of the final book of the Torah are put forth, an ending followed swiftly by a beginning, when the first sounds of the first book of the Torah are put forth. As a way closes, a way opens, and we begin again in love.
>
> We are all called together.[38]

In that moment, I recognized that a call to worship did not have to fit one specific Christian format, as I had imagined. Of course, in Judaism, the *Bar'chu* calls worshipers to pray. Richard Levy comments on this idea,

> What does it mean to be called to worship? All serious activity requires preparation. The prayers and blessings that precede *Bar'chu* are warm-ups for the individual. Now communal prayer begins. The leader asks, "Are you ready to pray?" And we respond, "Yes! Let us pray![39]

Jenn's introduction to this service set me at ease, and also invigorated me. Her words felt personal and honest, completely unpretentious. I was with her, and I was ready to pray.

The service continued with the singing of Psalm 118:14, *Ozi V'zimrat Yah*—"My strength and my God-song; these will be my salvation." The words were unfamiliar to many people in the room (although they could read them transliterated on a handout), but the tune was simple and repetitive, and people quickly joined in. I led the melody,

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[38] Jenn Lindsay, October 12, 2009.
[39] Richard Levy, in *Mishkan T'filah*, 59.

accompanied by Jenn's harmonies, and another UTS student joined on the drum. There was a spirit in the air.

After the lively singing faded to a quieter tone, we moved to the next part of the service: the chanting of Torah (unfortunately not from an actual scroll), its end and its beginning. I chanted the last three verses of Deuteronomy, and towards the end of the service, Megan chanted the first three verses of Genesis. Before I began, I wanted to provide a context for this ritual, which I imagined many people in the room had never before experienced. I shared a brief history of cantillation, and explained its function in the dramatization of our sacred scroll. I began chanting each verse, first in Hebrew and then in English, lining up the cantillation with the English as closely as possible, as I had translated word by word. This method of chanting Torah allows the community to hear which words are highlighted by the trope, and to understand in the vernacular what is being read. Chanting the English words aloud gives them so much more power than just skimming them to oneself while listening to the Hebrew. It makes the text come alive for everyone in the room. Personally, I have found that this technique gives me greater insight into the text than just reading a translation, as I analyze each Hebrew word so that the line makes sense, and at the same time, rings with deep beauty.

Megan followed my chanting with a personal reflection on Simchat Torah, in which she described the momentous and melancholy occasion of finishing her favorite book, a point in time she wished she could mark in some way. She then likened that moment to the ending of our Torah each year at this time, saying farewell to Moses as he goes to die on Mount Nebo. However, with the Torah, "the story does not end there—we are still writing the stories of our people." We dance with the Torah, she explained, to

honor its place at the center of our existence. With the reading of the Torah each new year, "the words will be the same, but we will be different." [40] Her story was accessible; everyone could relate to her personal experience. She gave honor to the Torah, without excluding those present in the chapel that day, and she let us see her true self in order to understand something greater.

We encountered another personal story at the end of the service. Brianne, Jenn's co-chair of the Interfaith Caucus, noted that this day marked her second wedding anniversary. She reflected on the similarities and differences that existed between her and her husband, saying that she found every one of them sacred. She saw the space between them, the space that marked them as different, as holy. She then asked why we all came together on that day, in that chapel. "We could come together in the classroom to discuss and challenge, we could come together over drinks to debate and laugh, we could come together in the living room to share stories and experiences. Why come together, and why come together here?" Just as she and her husband came together in their sacred differences, so had we come together. We did not take a vow, this was not a life commitment, but it was a brief moment in time when we became a sacred community. Why did we come together? As Brianne so beautifully stated, "We come together because, with love, the space in-between us that is created by our differences need not separate us."[41]

We closed the service with the singing of Psalm 118:19, *Pitchu Li*, "Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to God." We,

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[40] Megan Goldman, October 12, 2009.
[41] Brianne Jacobs, October 12, 2009.

the worship leaders, had hoped that we could begin dancing and that people would join in. I was unsure that this would happen successfully. How were we going to create a space safe enough for people to feel comfortable dancing? Again, I was wrong. People moved from their seats and joined us in a dancing circle, invigorated by the words and prayers they had heard and sung that day. We had taken a particular Jewish tradition and had adapted it to fit a new context; we had made it accessible to an interfaith community, opened everyone's eyes to new ideas. Even my own previously skeptical eyes had been opened. I have a new view of Simchat Torah after sharing this experience with my fellow worship leaders of the UTS Interfaith Caucus.

What I had not realized was how sensitive the UTS worship leaders were to the various faith traditions present in James Chapel that day. Without saying it aloud, they had already adopted the essential interfaith rule of not offending anyone. This service was about much more than that; it was about taking a particularistic holiday, Simchat Torah, and using it as a base to teach about bigger ideas, about beginnings and endings, about coming together to celebrate in our similarities and differences. In sharing a meaningful ritual with this interfaith community, I learned through teaching about my own tradition, and through listening to my fellow leaders' relevant reflections. It forced me to stop and look at myself in relation to a holiday that I had not contemplated so deeply in previous years.

Cantor Angela Buchdahl shared a similar sentiment when describing an event she helped to lead for an interfaith community:

> Manhattan Together, the local IAF affiliate for the New York City region, had an Assembly, and they asked me to give the benediction for the gathering. Over 200

> people of many different faiths and cultures gathered together in the social hall of an Upper East Side Church. An entire long table was filled with Spanish speakers from upper Manhattan who listened to the Assembly through a translator headset. They shared their challenges—slum landlords, inadequate education for their children, bureaucratic red tape for services—and their big and small triumphs. The Assembly was one week before Passover, and I decided to end with us singing from the Passover liturgy, a message of empathy and unity. *B'Chol Dor Vador*—"In every generation, we are each to know what it was to be a slave." I taught that we are not to think only of our ancestors as slaves, but that each one of us, in each generation, are to feel what it is to be a slave. And that as long as anyone was living in housing without heat, or with mold and wet floors, that we were all still enslaved in deplorable conditions. That as long as any of our children were placed in schools that could not adequately educate them, then we were all not being educated, and that we were still enslaved. This was not just someone else's problem, these were our problems. I taught them the chorus of the melody in Hebrew and sang the words with the group. It was inspiring to watch this diverse group, each connected with a sense of common humanity—sharing our struggles and challenges and working together to try to repair them. It was amazing to use a text in Hebrew that is so particularistic, and yet felt so unifying. We ended with a sense of hopefulness and the possibility of redemption.[42]

Cantor Buchdahl's experience shows the power of connecting personal experience with particularistic tradition, framing a specific Jewish text in a context that makes it meaningful and understandable for a diverse community. Cantor Buchdahl was recently asked to be a part of a planning committee for the inauguration of the new president of Auburn Seminary, Rev. Dr. Katherine Rhodes Henderson, and invited me to sit in on one of the planning meetings. I found the experience epitomized the type of interfaith worship that I have discussed here in this thesis: worship based on deep and thoughtful dialogue, pushing the boundaries of what it means to come together as an interfaith community in worship.

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[42] Personal Interview with Cantor Angela Buchdahl, December 18, 2009.

Auburn's new motto, and the focus of this inauguration ceremony is "Trouble the waters, heal the world." When we stir up the waters of superficial niceties and of tolerance, when we take a good hard look at our differences so that we may better understand them, we move to a deeper level of relationship with each other. Auburn's mission, in part, is to "encourage thoughtful conversation across the often divisive boundaries of faith, race, class and gender."[43] Auburn's leaders are surely taking this mission to heart while planning this ceremony.

Using their motto as their main concept, the committee members were each asked to think about the significance of water in their various traditions. Cantor Buchdahl, sharing the Jewish perspective, explained the tradition of *mikveh*, the ritual bath, and elaborated on the connection between water and transformation. "As the Jews crossed the Red Sea," Cantor Buchdahl explained, "some say that the water was like a birth canal, that when they emerged on the other side, it was as if they had been reborn."[44] The faces of the Christian thinkers in the room lit up; they loved this imagery! They had never thought of the text in this way before (neither had I, for that matter). It was inspiring to watch people of different faith traditions shedding light on a well-known story in unexpected but enlightening ways. As they continued talking, Cantor Buchdahl mentioned the idea of using familiar traditions as a starting point for innovation, and explained the ritual foot-washing ceremony she had created to celebrate her daughter's birth (which was explained in detail in the previous chapter). Reverend Henderson, the new president, was very moved by this creative ceremony and wondered aloud if it would

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[43] Taken from the Auburn Seminary website, http://www.auburnsem.org/about/mission.asp?nsectionid=1&pageid=3, accessed January 8, 2010.
[44] Cantor Angela Buchdahl, December 14, 2009.

be possible to adapt it for use at the inauguration. Cantor Buchdahl suggested that it could be a hand-washing ceremony, where various people offer blessings for the new president and pour water over her hands. The water would symbolize both hospitality and transformation, as Reverend Henderson embarks on her new role. I look forward to witnessing how this inauguration ceremony unfolds in the coming months. These leaders are approaching this interfaith endeavor with open minds and innovative thinking, committed to engage each other, and to engage the community that will be present at the ceremony in April.

As clergy leaders embark on planning meaningful interfaith worship, they must remember that religion is ever-changing, always developing in new ways based on surroundings and interactions. Professor Eck comments on the dynamic nature of faith traditions,

> I might sing "Give me that old-time religion! It's good enough for me!" with as much gusto as anyone, but in my heart I know that the old-time religion is not "good enough" unless those of us who claim it are able to grapple honestly and faithfully with the new questions, challenges, and knowledge posed to us by the vibrant world of many living faiths. To be good enough, the old-time religion has to be up to the challenge of an intricately interdependent world.[45]

When we come together in interfaith worship, our goal should not be to sing and pray in harmony the universal texts that only vaguely resemble anyone's actual tradition. Let us bring forth the richness of our traditions to these gatherings. What is the point of coming together in worship if it does nothing to change us in some way? We come to learn how individuals see the world through the lens of their faith traditions, to be challenged by

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[45] Eck, *A New Religious America*, 24.

unfamiliar perspectives, and to be moved by personal stories. We come to teach about our own traditions and stories and to learn about ourselves in new contexts.

CHAPTER 3

Bringing Intention to the Music of Interfaith Worship

Music is a necessary component in developing interfaith connections. Music plays a central role in worshiping together, as it enables dialogue in a new and more accessible way. Music is a different kind of language.

> It has been said that music is the heartbeat of a people, and if one is to study the culture of a people, one can learn volumes just by hearing their music. The music of a people tells their story. Judith Kaplan Eisenstein put it beautifully when she stated, "When we live for a moment with that music, we are touching the pulse itself, and our own is quickened in turn."[1]

Interfaith worship services become grand and unique opportunities for exposure to people's stories and to new musical expressions of how people of diverse faith traditions view the world and understand God. "To sing or hear music that reflects the reality of particular cultures acknowledges the theological claim that God's activity is known more accurately through many voices and symbols, rather than through one or only a few."[2] Each group brings the richness of its traditions; each group has something to teach – especially through its music, as Hebrew Union College Professor Merri Lovinger Arian writes, "As an educational tool, music has been proven to be effective in the learning of new material."[3] We often think of this link between music and education as something

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[1] Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, *Heritage of Music: The Music of the Jewish People* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1990), 3 as quoted in Merri Lovinger Arian, "Music, Prayer, and Sacred Community," in Bruce Kadden and Barbara Binder Kadden, eds. *Teaching Tefilah* (Denver, CO: A.R.E. Publishing, 2004), 159.
[2] Janet R. Walton, "North American Culture and Its Challenges to Sacred Sound," in Lawrence A. Hoffman and Janet R. Walton, eds. *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.), 4.
[3] Merri Lovinger Arian, "Music, Prayer, and Sacred Community," 159.

reserved for elementary school classrooms, but it can apply to worship as well. “Think of education as the transmission of tradition,” Lawrence A. Hoffman advises. “Worship is the religious ritual through which tradition is most effectively transmitted.”[4]

But transmission occurs only when teachers and worship leaders know their audience. They must be appropriately in touch with what it is that they are transmitting – that is, they must stay updated on current musical trends. And they must be expert at the art of ritual transmission -- able to provide relevant contexts and accessible transitions to keep their community engaged. They must know the capabilities of music, from creating awareness of our bodies, to triggering past memories, to connecting us with all that surrounds us, literally and spiritually. The time has come for interfaith worship to reclaim the power of congregational song, in its ability to unite, uplift, and transform each participating individual.

People often forget the power of the human voice. The voices in much of the music heard today on MTV, Satellite Radio, or iTunes have been digitally adjusted to sound perfect. Athletes turn to steroids to hit home runs; recording artists access electronic manipulation to produce flawless albums. How is this phenomenon affecting our perceptions of the human voice? These techniques send the message that real human voices are not good enough to be heard. We are constantly barraged by perfected voices, in videos, television, and even in “live performances.” Theologian and hymn-writer Brian Wren comments on the effects of this kind of “studio sound”: “The result for many is

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[4] Personal communication.

'electronic discouragement,'[5] as the quality of recorded sound persuades us that our own voice has little value."[6] The term "electronic discouragement" was coined in 1991; it is even more fitting now in 2010, when studio sound has become less human than ever before.

In addition to our feelings of inferiority when we compare our "real" voices to those of recordings, we are rarely encouraged to sing along. "Live music is no longer the norm, so our role as listeners is reinforced."[7] Even pop concerts do not boost our confidence as singers. Despite outeard appearances, rather than being about audience participation, they have become dazzling and dizzying light shows, where the star performer is showcased as a glittering jack-of-all-trades. Although many diehard fans actually sing along, the high decibel levels make it impossible for people to hear their own voices.

For better or for worse, synagogues and churches have bought in to the popularity of the rock concert setting. Worship conducted in this style is meant to appeal to younger crowds, enlivening prayer for people under the age of forty. The service may contain less glitz than the rock concert, but the sounds produced are similarly loud, amplified to completely fill the space. Wren critiques this type of music in the worship setting:

> Crank[ing] up the volume diminish[es] personal connection with the congregation… "So the sound is bigger than life, and the person who makes it is

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[5] Martin Josman, music director of the National Chorale in Manhattan, quoted by Marialisa Calta, "For Many, Singing is an Untried Art," *New York Times*, 24 April 1991, as quoted in Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 52.
[6] Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*, 52.
[7] Ibid., 52.

> regarded as bigger than life."[8] If that person then tries to encourage audience participation without dropping the volume, the amplified voice overwhelms the communal voice and discourages the participation that was sought.[9]

We cannot discredit this new lively style of worship altogether, since it has successfully reshaped the worship community by drawing in younger crowds. However, Wren warns against forgetting about the voices in our community, old or young. People need to hear themselves singing, so that they are not merely witnesses of worship, but are fully engaged participants. How can we empower congregational singing, not only with the songs we choose, but with the way we sing them?

Worship leaders have a responsibility to reintroduce their congregants to an appreciation of communal song. They can remind their communities that singing is a "full body" experience – that is, it reconnects us to an awareness of our bodies, starting from our core: the heart, which provides a constant rhythm. Don Saliers, church musician and professor of theology at Emory University notes,

> The human heart beats—slowly, quickly, with intense pounding, or gently—depending on what is happening to us. Those rhythms accompany all our days and become a deep metaphor for how we feel in the world… It is no accident that religious traditions also use the root metaphor of the heart when they wish to speak of the deepest part of human beings…[10]

Next comes the breath, without which singing is impossible. The Hebrew word for breath is *n'shimah,* which shares a root with the word for soul, *n'shamah.* It is both the

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[8] Paul Westermeyer, "The Future of Congregational Song" *The Hymn* 46:1 (January 1995), 4-9, as quoted in Ibid., 53.
[9] Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*, 53.
[10] Don Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 24.

breath and the soul that carry our voices out into the world. And it is the breath and the soul that are heard when we sing. Saliers writes about another Hebrew word for breath:

> In biblical images, to breathe is to live. The wonderful Hebrew word *ruach* means breath and spirit. *Ruach* is what the Bible says God breathed into human beings at the creation (Genesis 2:7), the breath of life, and the *ruach* of God was also understood to be the inspiration of men and women who speak poetry and proclaim prophecy.[11]

The connection of music with the body explains why some of our earliest and most powerful memories are related to music. These musical memories are ingrained into the fabric of our skin. Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller suggests, "Sometimes it is the associative connection that one's memory makes to a particular melody that moves people the most."[12] Professor Saliers reflects on music's powerful role throughout our lives:

> In the end, music carries many of us right into old age. Don recalls interviewing a group of Methodist women in their eighties and nineties about what hymns and songs they loved and why. They responded with selections from the all-time church hit parade of golden oldies… These they had sung, some of them, for eighty years or more. When they began to say why they loved them, they spoke of hearing their grandmother's voice; of feeling the vibrations in their mother's breast as they leaned against her in church; of the squeak of the parlor organ when the family would gather to sing; or of church suppers, funerals, or 'dinner on the grounds' in their Southern traditions. They were speaking of the body memory of these songs and hymns. Something about their whole lives were encoded in the singing. Such is the power of music to carry us through life's passages.[13]

I witnessed music carrying one man to the end of his life, when I served as a hospice chaplain two years ago. Marshall was 83 and suffered from both Parkinson's and dementia. The first time I visited him, I began looking around his room in the group

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[11] Ibid., 24.
[12] Benjie Ellen Schiller, "The Many Faces of Jewish Sacred Music" *Synagogue 2000: Prayer Curriculum* (Synagogue 2000, 2001), 8-21.
[13] Saliers, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live*, 51.

home, asking him about all of the photographs on the wall. His eyes filled up occasionally, but his remarks were few. I tried unsuccessfully to engage him in conversation. And then I tried music! I sat down next to him and began to sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Soon after I started, I noticed Marshall quietly singing along. He remembered every word. Clearly, Marshall's connection to music was being stored in a different place than his language. Merri Lovinger Arian, comments on a similar experience with older music therapy patients with limited speaking ability: "Something about the engaging quality of music managed to stay locked securely in their memories, and the instant they heard those familiar tunes the words came tumbling forth."[14] Perhaps it was a "body memory," as Saliers describes above, that kept the words of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" alive and vibrant in Marshall's brain. Whatever Marshall's memories may have been, music enabled a connection between us.

Just as music holds a mysterious power to transport us back in time to the memories of our childhood, so too it enables us to connect with our spirituality in a way language cannot. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "The wave of a song carries the soul to heights which utterable meanings can never reach."[15] We spoke in chapter one about "knowing before whom you stand." When we sing, we are able to *know* God in new ways. Emily Saliers, one of the Indigo Girls writes,

> We speak of how music can deepen human life beyond measure and bring us closer to the truth of what it means to be human and to the transcendent power of love beyond our understanding. Music, we keep saying, is some kind of mysterious mediator between us and the God we seek."[16]

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[14] Merri Lovinger Arian, "Music, Prayer, and Sacred Community," 158.
[15] Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 39.
[16] Saliers, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live*, 5.

When I was a student cantor last year, one moment stands out as providing a certain sense of being connected to God through music. I was fortunate to work with an extremely gifted pianist, a cello-playing congregant, and a number of other female congregants who loved to sing at services. As the year went on, we developed a repertoire of a few duets and songs with multiple parts. Our most regular collaboration was singing Laura Berkson's *Yotser Or* round. I had written it out roughly for them all to learn. One day, the pianist asked if he could write out the music and add a cello part. I was overjoyed. He created a counterpoint melody, which blended with our voices. What had already been beautiful as *a cappella* harmony, was now enriched by the sound of the cello.

We finished singing the *Barchu*, and then Nina, Liz, Sandy, and Connie joined me on the *bimah*. Robin sat close by with her cello, and sounded the rich introductory notes, which rang out in the vaulted space, as I began singing alone. The second time through, one voice would join me, and then another, and gradually our five voices came together in perfect harmony, as the cellist grounded us with her bass line. At this one moment of the service, as we all sang together with a mutual mindfulness, something magical happened. I was overwhelmed by the sound, and I began to see the space around me in a new way. I watched the morning light come in through the windows at the back of the sanctuary, and I felt that the words of the prayer held more profound meaning than they ever had: "Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, Creator of light and darkness, who makes peace and fashions all things…"[17] Each week we were able to

[17] Translation from *Mishkan T'filah*, 228.

sing together, I looked forward to this moment. It helped me focus on the words of *Yotser Or*, and also strengthened me for the rest of the service.

Heschel writes of the ability of music to express the inexpressible, but he also writes about the importance of silence: "God loves what is left over at the bottom of the heart and cannot be expressed in words. It is the ineffable in us which reaches God rather than the expressed feeling."[18] Silent prayer is often incorporated into worship services, and provides worshipers with an opportunity to look inside themselves for these personal "left-overs," to listen to their own breath, to focus on their own prayers. As we think about *how* we are using music in our services, and *how* it is actually being heard, we must also think about how *silence* plays a role in worship: in the spaces between prayers, in designated moments meant for individual contemplation. Rabbi Elaina Rothman writes of the silence that each of us carries within:

> Beyond the noise, behind the words there is a great pool of silence. Think of a seashore with great waves breaking on it; beyond the waves - the sea is calm. The service, the peripheral noise, is the breakers on the shore; beyond is a sea of silence which only we, individually, can reach, but we must go through the surf to get there. And if we do get to the silence beyond we will find that it is infinite, deep - a place where we might meet God or come face to face with ourselves. For it is the silence that dwells on the very edge of our experience. Rarely are we able to make it through the breakers to the silence beyond, but when we have been there we return changed; for we realise that the soul needs silence just as much as the mind needs the stimulation of the world and its noise.[19]

The music that follows silent prayer can be extremely moving if it is selected with attention to how its mood relates to the previous moment and how it will connect to the worshipers' individual intentions. Congregants have just taken time to explore their inner

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[18] Heschel quotes Rabbi Wolf of Zhitomir, *Man's Quest for God*, 40.
[19] Elaina Rothman, "A Meditation on Silence," *The Study Anthology of 'Seder Hat'fillot: Forms of Prayer'* (London: The Movement for Reform Judaism, 2008), 597.

selves, and they may feel vulnerable. Following this silence, a community must be eased back into the communal space. Joyce Rosenzweig, faculty member at HUC-JIR and extraordinary musician and accompanist, recommends following silent prayer by beginning with a solo melody sung by the cantor, something quiet and slow, that builds very gradually from the silence into musical prayer. This melody then transitions into a congregational tune, which builds in intensity as people join in. They have been gently guided back from solitude to the communal worship space.

This intentional planning gives continuity to both the silent prayer and the music that follows. The two pieces become part of a larger composition that is the worship service as a whole. Each piece of the service must fit with what comes before and after it, producing a seamless composition from beginning to end. The sense of a larger context makes each section of the service more relevant to the worshiping community. There is meaning and intention in every choice. When I worked with the Union Theological Seminary students to plan the Interfaith Simchat Torah service (discussed in Chapter 2), we created a context for each of the separate parts of the service, providing personal stories, explanations, and music that all fit together to make an understandable and relevant whole for the community. For example, I framed my chanting of Torah by providing background information about the significance of cantillation. I then chanted the text in Hebrew and English, taking a familiar text and presenting it in a new, and yet accessible, way. It was my hope that when the community heard my unfamiliar chanting, the familiar text would take on new and deeper significance.

Similarly, when prayers we sing together are given context and relevance, they can hold new meanings for us as individuals and as a collective. In a course I took this past semester entitled "The Art of Creating Meaningful Worship," two of my classmates, Cassi and Sara, demonstrated a new approach to the *Mi Sheberach*, the prayer for healing. Often, before the *Mi Sheberach* is sung, worship leaders ask for congregants to share the names of those for whom they are praying. Cassi and Sara began by asking the class, the symbolic congregation, to turn to a partner, engage in a private conversation about the persons for whom we were praying, and share some information about the illnesses and challenges our loved ones were experiencing. We were given a few minutes to talk, and then Cassi began a gentle strum of the guitar, as Sara called us back together, saying:

> We do not carry our burdens alone. No matter how heavy, we count on one another and on God to hear our struggles, to witness our pain, to help us to lift our load. And we offer the same to one another. As we sing together the *Mi Sheberach* prayer for healing, keep in mind the person or people that your partner has mentioned, focus your energy on bringing them healing, comfort and peace. Know that your partner has you and your loved ones in mind. Together as a community we pray for all who are in need of healing, all who are present today, all who cannot be here today, all who are in our hearts.[20]

This creative approach to a well-known prayer brought me to a heightened spiritual space. We sing the *Mi Sheberach* every week, but this time, I heard something new. Knowing that my partner was thinking of my loved ones, and I of hers, filled the prayer with a deeper meaning. I felt engaged. The prayer became more personal and more directed when I came to it with greater intention.

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[20] Sara Newman and Cassi Kail, written for class, November 19, 2009.

I experienced another example of creating relevant and accessible prayer when I visited the Zion Baptist Church in Harlem last February. When I arrived at the church, the music had already begun. At this early point of the service, all of the congregants, mostly women, were taking turns standing up and praying spontaneously, thanking the Lord for helping them get through the week, for helping them through trying times. Some women stood up and started singing from their heart. As tears streamed down their cheeks, the organist immediately joined in, knowing just the right key. The drums and bass guitar came in soon after. Other congregants took out their tambourines and maracas, an improvised rhythm section. As each woman prayed, all of the other congregants would chime in with "Amen," nodding their heads and sharing in the pain that the other had endured. This type of spontaneous and improvised worship was a stark contrast to the Jewish customs with which I am familiar. These women effortlessly brought together the soulful music of worship with the reality of their lives to create a meaningful community space, where individual prayer combined with communal non-judgmental response. Although I was a stranger in this church, I was immediately welcomed into an intimate and sacred space.

The congregation of Zion Baptist Church revealed the reality of the congregants' lives through the medium of personal prayer, especially because of the power of coming together as a community in song. Singing together with someone creates an unexpected bond. As Don Saliers reflects, "That's what music does—it encodes life, most especially shared life. You don't have to be a performer to know this, but if you have ever done

music together with someone, you know this with special intensity."[21] When I worked as a chaplain, I shared an unexpected bond through music with the friend of a hospice patient. On one of my on-call weekends, I received a call from Olivia. Her friend, Byron, was in hospice care and his death was imminent. She wanted me to come and pray with her. When I arrived at the hospice center and came to Byron's room where Olivia was waiting, Byron was continuously shifting in the bed. He was non-communicative and seemed very uncomfortable. Recognizing that he might die at any minute, Olivia was fearful and concerned. She proposed that I ask Byron if he would accept the Lord. Olivia did not know that I was Jewish. In that moment it did not seem appropriate to tell her, so instead I explained that I did not feel comfortable asking Byron this question. Olivia was frustrated with my answer and left the room. Unsure of how to proceed, I began singing *Amazing Grace*, a song I had used many times over the summer while working with patients. As I was singing, Olivia came back into the room. I finished the chorus and stopped, wondering how she would respond. She said, "That was so beautiful." Her mood had changed completely after hearing the music. I asked if she wanted to sing with me. She said she would like that very much. Together we sang to Byron, and slowly his body responded to the music and quieted. When Olivia and I sang together, we shared a moment in time in a way that neither of us had been expecting. As a team, we had brought a sense of calm to the room, and Byron had responded. Although Olivia and I came from very different faith traditions, our sharing of music dissolved

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[21] Saliers, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live*, 9.

arbitrary boundaries that might have separated us. In our efforts to support Byron, we were joined in a common purpose.

When we sing as a community, we not only connect with each other; we also create the possibility for something new in our musical collaboration. As Benjie Ellen Schiller writes, "When all voices join to create a resounding chorus of prayer, when every voice contributes its sound to the whole, a new expression of prayer is born. Even among strangers, we sense both a personal and a spiritual connection with those with whom we pray."[22] Don Saliers observed, "When a religious community sings of its great need for mercy or shares hymns expressing thanksgiving and awe, something is given to each soul, something that is then released into the world's life stream."[23] When we plan the music of interfaith worship, we must recognize its great potential to teach, to empower, to change every soul in the room. These are not simple goals, but they are achievable, as long as we pay careful attention to the types of songs and prayers used, and to the ways in which these songs and prayers are presented. When an interfaith community comes together in musical worship, it becomes a strengthened community. As Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz wrote,

> Alone,
> I cannot lift my voice in song.
> Then you come near and sing with me.
> Our prayers fuse and a new voice soars.
> Our bond is beyond voice and voice.
> Our bond is one of spirit and spirit.[24]

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[22] Schiller, "The Many Faces of Jewish Sacred Music," 8-20.
[23] Saliers, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live*, 14.
[24] Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz, *Entrances to Holiness are Everywhere* (White Plains, NY: Congregation Kol Ami of White Plains, 1998), 10b, quoted in Arian, "Music, Prayer, and Sacred Community," 160.

CONCLUSION

Interfaith worship has the potential to be a holy honoring of difference. When people experience the practices and sacred texts of the "other," they are given an opportunity to learn from the contrasts with their own familiar traditions. Through this learning, stereotypes and generalizations can be replaced by appreciation and connections. Jewish-American philosopher Horace Kallen, in his 1915 article, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," paints a fitting picture:

> As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization…[1]

Professor Diana Eck extends Kallen's warning against full assimilation into the melting pot, writing,

> Learning to hear the musical lines of our neighbors, their individual and magnificent interpretations of the themes of America's common covenants, is the test of cultural pluralism. Our challenge today is… whether it will be a symphony or cacophony, whether we can continue to play through dissonant moments.[2]

When it comes to creating meaningful interfaith worship, we must take Eck and Kallen's profound musical metaphors literally. There are two challenges inherent in the image of the symphony.

- First: How does a religious group present its distinctive sound in a way that both respects and engages those who may never have heard it before?

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[1] Horace Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," *The Nation* 100, no. 2590 (February 18-25, 1915): 190-94, 217-20, as cited in Eck, *A New Religious America,* 58.
[2] Eck, *A New Religious America,* 58-9.

- And second: How can our varied musical traditions be woven together to create a unified and relevant service that speaks to all participants?

These challenges must be met with careful planning, open-mindedness, sensitivity to all participants, and substantial creativity and innovation. The time has come to reconceptualize interfaith worship; the time has come to embrace the dissonance.

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