

## Cantor's Notes

# It's Tefilah Time

With the year underway, I've been getting to know many for the TBT families and notably, the students in our Religious School. Each Sunday, I'm privileged to engage students in Tefilah (prayer). Our weekly challenge in Reform congregations is to create a learning lab for students to explore spirituality and their role in Jewish communal life.

Tefilah time provides opportunities for sacred words in a foreign tongue to feel more familiar in our mouths. Its also a time to explore the meaning of these prayers, as well as how and what it means to have a spiritual life, what that sounds like and the role each of us can play in a community of peers.

To accomplish these aims, we've made minor modifications to Tefilah. While as with any changes, there may be some modest confusion among students, ultimately these will strengthen our students comfort, confidence, and competency in Jewish prayer.

For 7th graders with a Bnai Mitzvah on the horizon, the desire to practice leading is palpable. In reality Tefilah time prepares students to participate in one as a member of a Jewish community for all the days of their lives. Since younger grades also participate in Tefilah time, the format must accommodate a diversity of skill levels in the room. 4th graders are just learning to piece Hebrew letters into words.

Unfortunately, when 7th graders step up to the Bima to practice "leading" as a group, those being "led" are fewer in number, it allows less confident 7th graders to

"hide" in the group's midst, whose fast pace leaves younger, less experienced students feeling lost.

A few small format tweaks are helping address these issues. First, our students are now seated together as a block in the pews, as a Cantor leads prayers facing them assisted by a selected student for each. This allows the Cantor to offer explanations, interpretations and lets students ask questions and offer insights to the group.

Now when called up to lead a prayer, students will do so at the side the Cantor, and in front of a sizeable, real congregation that includes their most competent peers, as it will be at their Bnai Mitzvah. Their peers, knowing they will soon do so as well, have more impetus to participate as they never know when they may be asked to lead. This in turn models for younger students who see, hear and eventually gain their growing confidence. Standing shoulder to shoulder with friends, reciting the words of our people, students experience what it is like to be part of a Jewish spiritual community.

In 30 short minutes, it is impossible to cover an entire morning service, and so each week we cover a slightly different set of prayers. Over the course of the year we will cover most of those that are part of TBT's standard format using our standard melodies. Still, one of hallmarks of Reform Jewish practice is adopting new melodies to reflect the aesthetics of the times. Over the course of the year, Tefilah time lets us hear a variety of melodies they will hear at summer camps, eventually Hillels and throughout their Jewish lives.

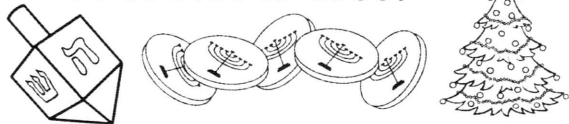
Pure recitation, however, is not the goal, as it precludes some important educational opportunities. Tefilah time offers a chance to apply Hebrew reading skills learned in the classroom. It is also an opportunity to explore the feelings about the words being said. For Jewish prayer is to take hold in our students' hearts, we have to spend time making our prayers meaningful.

Each week, we'll rotate our focus onto a specific prayer, its translation and interpretation offered by our Reform siddur (prayerbook). More importantly, we'll tease out the personal meaning each of our students carry within them. Tefilah time provides safe space to explore this territory of spirituality, ask questions, and articulate their feelings. This is critical to their spiritual growth, and to do it together, in front of and with the support of fellow students is truly a remarkable gift to our children.

Already, we've received good feedback about these adjustments to Religious School Tefilah. All parents and congregants as welcome to join us Sundays at noon to participate. Who knows, you might learn something!

*Cantor Adam*

### Interfaith Potluck & Discussion: To Tree or Not to Tree?



Come join us for an Interfaith Pot Luck dinner on Sunday, December 10th at 6:30 at TBT. Share ideas, swap tips or just start the holiday season with friends old and new. Whether your adjustment to an interfaith celebration was easy or complicated, you can help take the stress out or add to the fun. Please bring a dish to share or just show up—the whole family is welcome!

Contact Joe Sutliff at [marketing@bethtorah.net](mailto:marketing@bethtorah.net)