Perfectly Imperfect
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June 21, 2024

The melodies and texts we use to enhance our prayer evolve because we evolve.

Changes to our services may feel hard—but the way we pray and the words we use have always changed. We know that through the way Reform practice has evolved to include or exclude things as our sense of how we see the world has changed. And even in Conservative, Reconstructionist Judaism and Orthodoxy, some of the prayers have changed over time. So, now, even if the core prayers don't change, we change as individuals and as a community, and so the expression of those prayers has to change.

Rabbi Larry Hoffman talks about the prayer book as the diary of the Jewish people, and times change.

It was one text from one time, but that diary was printed and reproduced. So, now, we use readings, breathing, movement and song to help make someone else's text full of our own experiences.

In our liturgy, the words may not change so much anymore, but it's how we read them and understand them that changes. And the liturgy in our book, the written prayers and even the melodies we use to sing them, *they are not themselves prayer*—they are just tools, vehicles, a means to an end, not the end itself. The prayers of our hearts, the hopes for our community, that is the destination.

The added adventure for a cantor, for clergy thinking about creating meaningful, sacred, gathering worship time, is that we each change not only throughout our lives, but we also change week to week—and the way we need to use our liturgy to reflect our lives changes week to week.

Our Friday night worship has become a place where many of our congregations around North America are engaging more folks. This includes people who have always engaged in the community as well as folks who are feeling outside of our experiences, or community adjacent—some who are connected but don't usually feel it's for them and people who are seeking a spiritual and communal home, a place where they can feel safe bringing their stories, their diverse experiences. Often, the way our prayers are expressed musically helps people feel at home in that diversity.

Our worship may invite us to join in a melody to a sacred text that comes from an experience not our own—Yemeni or Iraqi, African or Latin, Yiddish or cantorial, Eastern European, English call and response, evocative chant or song of the folk experience. And these melodies—just like the few examples of V'shamru alter how we think about the prayers and how we open ourselves up to our own prayer—create images, or feelings, or emotions, or agitations, that invite us to see ourselves *differently* than we did when we came in, which is one of the goals of communal prayer.

We have this one liturgy, and it's intended to help us tell our Jewish communal story—creation, revelation, redemption, peace, hope. But, as we know, we are not made up of one story! We come from Eastern Europe and North Africa, from the Middle East and Latin America. We come from

Orthodox upbringings and from outside Judaism. We come from LA, or we come from Pittsburgh or New York, or from Little Rock, AK. We are not of one story, one tapestry, but many threads.

If I ask everyone to break out in *the* traditional "Adon Olam," we will all sing a few different ones. *There is no traditional one. What's traditional? Whose tradition?* Mine, growing up Midwest classical in a family of Eastern European decent with father who was a Jew by choice? Or one of yours, as someone who has one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent who grew up Conservative but spent time with your grandparents visiting church? Or one of yours, who came here by way of Buenos Aries? We will sing different "Adon Olam" settings, because there is no *one* tradition.

So, the great opportunity in Friday night worship is that we can welcome everyone—people seeking a new home and people who already love what it means to be with other Beth-El families. We can hear melodies that were familiar to you but are brand new to you. We can be moved to tears by a melody, a memory (*for that's really what melodies are—and none of us have the same memories*); and at another moment, wish we could hear something different.

The beauty and opportunity you have to build sacred community with the diverse gifts of the artists and clergy joining your community a few times next year—and as you and Stephanie continue to learn and grow together with this team—is that each of your guests will know and understand this value. They will bring styles and modalities that are familiar to many, but not all. Some selections will move some of you, at different times. They will open new ways of hearing and feeling these sacred words, and perhaps tap into the experiences of those who sit on the periphery in our worship.

My colleague Rabbi Ken Chasen, who teaches with me, talks about *perfectly imperfect*. That's our goal, our job, really our great opportunity and gift of worship: that I will feel connected to, or really be moved by the expression of *some of the prayers, some of the time*. But a member of the community near me will be moved by other prayers, at other times. And we can still tap into the deepest part of ourselves, of what it means to be alive, our hopes and fears—even if the melody of a prayer is not our favorite one. Our prayer comes from within. No one said that a whole worship service should be everything you want it to be—and prayer can't be (it's hard, just like a yoga practice, or a class, or an outing with your family).

Instead, we all work together to share an experience. And, frankly, in my experience of worship, the sharing, the giving up and making way for others to be deeply moved by their stories being evident in worship, can be the most powerful part of communal prayer. You can make individual prayer everything you want; you can curate your own Spotify list of melodies. But communal prayer asks us to be in sacred communion with others—to better understand ourselves, our fellow walkers on the path and our world.

Shabbat shalom.