



# A Thought for Shabbat

Beth El Synagogue, Omaha, NE

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## Searching for Spirituality

by Rabbi Alan Lew

I watch Jews come to our morning minyan searching for spirituality--a spirituality which I know very well is there--which I feel very powerfully every morning of my life. A very few manage to find what they are looking for, but the vast majority do not. The power of the service seems lost on them. Or in my friend's words, they don't even seem to know what this (the service) is.

Part of the problem is education. People don't understand Hebrew, and they don't understand the structure or the function of the service, and this keeps them outside of it--and therefore, untouched by its deep current of feeling.

But that is only part of the problem, and, I believe, not the most important part by far. It's important to understand the language and the structure of the Jewish prayer service, but I think the real spirituality of the service lies elsewhere--in the rhythm of the service, in the flow of gesture and sound, and in the silences between and behind the language. Spirituality is non-verbal and a-rational. Understanding can certainly enhance it, but it can never contain it, nor even convey it very well.

Perhaps there was a time when Jewish life imparted this kind of awareness automatically--a time when whole communities of Jews were so sensitized to the sacred in the world by rigorous, traditional observance that the spiritual potential of the daily service was perfectly obvious to them.

Real prayer is a fundamental mindfulness activity. The basic thing you're trying to do is concentrate on the text of the prayer service, but, inevitably, your mind is carried off by other thoughts or distractions, and when you become aware that you are distracted, you gently bring your mind back.

People complain about the speed of the Jewish prayer service. They say it's too fast for them to understand the words, but it's that very rush of words that works as a kind of anti-language. It wipes your mind clean of language and conceptual thought even though it's made out of language and conceptual thought. Daveners who have had strokes that affect their ability to speak are still able to daven because prayer is a nonverbal activity. Even though it uses language as a medium, it comes from the nonverbal center of the brain.

Still, language is language, and it often happens that a particular word or phrase will unexpectedly take on new meaning during the prayer service. In the midst of praying, a phrase will suddenly assert itself and rise out of the jumble of sounds the way a particular sound or sensation can race to the foreground of one's consciousness during mindfulness meditation. Certain phrases divorce themselves from their obvious context and take on a new meaning, or seem to be speaking directly to you. The prayer service hovers on the boundary between the verbal and the nonverbal.

In fact, though the prayer service uses language, this language describes a nonverbal event, an exchange of pure energy. I often felt this most intensely during the Amidah, the centerpiece of the service. During the Amidah, we pray for various personal concerns--healing, material well-being, spiritual redemption--and, toward the end of the Amidah, we pray also that our voices will be heard and that God will be pleased with our prayers.

Standing silently with my hands clasped to my chest, I would often feel that these things we were praying for, and the prayers themselves, were ascending and descending like the angels on Jacob's ladder: divine energy coming down to heal us and redeem us, and a divine consciousness to meet the energy of our voices and our prayers as we raised them to heaven. All content, all imagery, verbal or otherwise, would sometimes fade away altogether as I said the Amidah, and I would feel myself to be in the presence of a formless transcendent radiance, which I always took to be the presence of God.

Shabbat Shalom!  
Rabbi Mordechai Levin