

## **Fabulously Observant: Prayer isn't boring, you are'**

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DAVID BENKOF , THE JERUSALEM POST

Jews often complain that prayer is boring. Young people resist going to synagogue - and older people drift away from prayer altogether - because they find it to be a chore. In response to this claim, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, perhaps the longest-tenured pulpit rabbi in California, once offered from the pulpit an admittedly obnoxious but nonetheless brilliant retort: "Prayer isn't boring, you are."

Of course, this aphorism by Schulweis, who has served the Conservative synagogue Valley Beth Shalom in Encino since 1970, was not meant to insult people, nor to turn them away from prayer. Quite the opposite. He posed a challenge for every Jew to find himself or herself inside the siddur, which is filled with beautiful poetry, meaningful philosophy and provocative theology.

At its best, prayer is an ongoing three-way conversation among the siddur, the person using it and God. In Schulweis's words, "Instead of looking outside and criticizing the relevance of a prayer - or perhaps even the process of prayer - look inside yourself to see where you may be lacking."

INTERESTINGLY, MANY of the Jews who complain that the siddur bores them can listen to a rock song like "American Pie" or "Hey Jude" or sing the national anthem at the stadium dozens or even hundreds of times without ever complaining that they're bored. Great musical compositions perpetually renew their meaningfulness as a person's life and even his or her day develops. The siddur works the same way. Many of us who pray on a regular basis cannot say "*Baruch she'amar v'haya ha'olam*" (Blessed be He who spoke and the world came into being) or "*L'cha dodi likrat kala*" (Go, my beloved, to greet the Sabbath bride) without being a little moved each time.

I know some people in 12-step programs, and they tell me the meetings often start with the same readings week after week. But they're rarely boring to alcoholics and other addicts, because everyone in the room is working on his or her own recovery. The guidelines and steps that are recited remind people of their own addictions and

compulsions, or at least those of their loved ones.

In a way, prayer is like another pillar of observant Jewish life: Shabbat. Just as *tefila* involves letting one's creativity conquer one's boredom, Shabbat is about finding creative enjoyment on a day when cellphones, iPods and DVD players are treated as hardly more useful than paperweights.

Some people think the real problem with *tefila* is Hebrew, which alienates English-speaking Jews. I disagree completely. Many if not most Israelis find *tefila* to be boring, and Hebrew is their first language. In addition, services at Reform temples in the US involve a lot of English, and many Reform teens and adults still find prayer boring.

Yet Hebrew prayers can be moving to English speakers even if they only know the barest details of the meaning. Often, but not always, the key is the tune. Even so, don't let anyone tell you you must pray in Hebrew. The siddur isn't even all in Hebrew. Important prayers like the Kaddish are in Aramaic, and in Eastern Europe, Jewish women used to recite Yiddish prayers. So vernacular prayers have a long history.

The answer to Schulweis's challenge is education. The more Jews learn about the pronunciation, order and meaning of services, the more likely they are to find significance in them. But Schulweis's point still stands - a Jew who is boring is likely to find prayer boring. Luckily, most Jews, deep down, are not boring - they just need to find a path to access the siddur.

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*'Fabulously Observant' will be a weekly column exploring life from the perspective of an Orthodox, conservative, openly gay American Jew in the process of making aliya.*

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