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"SPIRITUAL STEW"

Objectives:

Participants will:

- discuss a variety of reasons why people pray
- clarify for themselves where, when, how and why they pray
- share their thoughts on prayer with their peer group.

Format: Creation of a "Spiritual Stew" (a values clarification exercise)

Rationale:

The overall concept for this "lesson" is developing analogy between nutrition/eating/balanced diet and t'fillah. That is, we eat for any number of reasons: we are hungry, we have nothing better to do, everyone else is doing it, we like to eat, we are told it is time to eat, etc. What we choose to eat depends on our sense of diet and nutrition, what we know is available, what we enjoy eating, and where we are (at home, in a restaurant, in a cafeteria, etc.). And, how we feel afterwards depends upon how well the food was prepared.

A parallel can thus be drawn between the processes and questions which we might subconsciously ask when sitting down to eat (or prepare a meal) and those which surround our thoughts on t'fillah in general. Why do we pray? Because we want to, we feel a need to, everyone else is doing it, we like it, or even because it happens to be time to pray. How we choose to pray is partially determined by the kinds of t'fillot available, what we enjoy, and where we are situated. Our reactions to t'fillah come from evaluating our experience, based on the fulfillment of the needs and expectations we had upon beginning the worship experience.

Procedure:

1. The leader begins eliciting from the participants the wide variety of reasons why people eat (see the "Rationale" for suggestions) and lists their reasons on a large sheet of paper in very general terms. For example:

"WE ARE HUNGRY"
"EVERYONE ELSE IS EATING"
"IT IS TIME TO EAT"

The group then devises t'fillah analogies and the leader lists them next to the "eating-reasons" on the paper.

The facilitator explains that just as food fulfills certain needs of the body as well as social needs, prayer works the same way for our "soul", for our sense of Jewish community, and social needs.

This section should take approximately 10 minutes.

2. The leader explains that the participants will have the opportunity now to create a "Spiritual Stew" for themselves. Just as a cook combines certain ingredients to create a tasty stew, they will do the same, but using "ingredients" which will help them to create a t'fillah which they would enjoy.

Each person is given a paper bowl and shown the "pantry," a table area with a wide number of cans and jars containing the "ingredients" they may choose from to make their stew. They are told that THERE IS NO ONE PERFECT SET OF INGREDIENTS; depending on each person's taste, the "stew" will come out a little differently. They should take their time, think carefully, and try to remember that what they are doing is creating a well-rounded, satisfying meal for themselves ... something they are comfortable with.

While participants are choosing their ingredients, the facilitator roams around the tables doing the following:

- a. Making sure participants understand the ingredients
- b. Helping facilitate a smooth flow around the ingredient tables, so that no one feels rushed or pressured by someone else
- c. Helping participants make their decisions by ASKING questions which can help them clarify their thinking, or give examples of certain ingredients

3. When done, have the participants spread out their ingredients in front of them. The facilitator quickly roams around and reads what the participants chose so that s/he has an idea of their choices, the most popu-

lar ones, etc.

- a. The leader has the participants indicate the two or three ingredients which they think are most important to them (i.e., their favorite ones). They should be prepared to explain to the group why they chose what they did.
- b. The participants are guided through a discussion of their stew using the following questions:

- What are their favorite ingredients? Why? How do those ingredients interact to help create a good spiritual stew?
- Did a majority of people agree on some ingredients as being most important? Discuss them and try to see why.
- Did the participants feel they created a good stew? Why or why not? If prayer is indeed like eating/cooking, what do they think are the key ingredients? What isn't important to them?

What spices did they add?

Wrap-Up:

How do the participants feel about what they just did? Did it help them to clarify some ideas which they had about prayer? What questions do they still have?

CREATING A "SPIRITUAL STEW"

- Obtain 29 No. 10 Tin Cans, clean them well.
- Create dittoes using the models provided for ingredients. Run thirty copies, each page on a different color paper (see notes on the page).
- Make labels for the cans, one per ingredient, large enough for participants to read easily. Glue them on the outside of the cans. (Try and color coordinate the labels with the dittoes (if "Why Do I Pray" responses are all in white, make the labels white, too).
- Cut up the ingredient dittoes and place them in the proper cans. Create signs for the four questions, color-coded with the labels.
- NOTE: The color coding will assist the debriefing process greatly.

The mitzvot are the means through which we can repair the world. With every properly done mitzvah, with every mitzvah that is performed with the right intention, we can release another spark from its material prison, and piece together the broken world. When the world is once again whole, *shaleim*, the Shekhinah (God's earthly presence) will be united with the Kudsha Brikh Hu, the Holy One, Blessed be He.

Even today, some prayerbooks instruct the reader to preface mitzvot such as putting on the tallit and tefillin by reciting the following formula:

"For the sake of the unification of the Holy One Blessed be He, and His Shekhinah, in fear and love to unify the Name, in perfect unity, in the name of all Israel, I am ready to perform [such and such a mitzvah]... May it be your will that this commandment be considered worthy, as if I had fulfilled it in all its details, precisions, and intentions, as well as the 613 commandments that are dependent on it."

Every part of our body, every move that we make, every act we perform, when accompanied by the proper intent, can serve to repair the world, to do *tikkun olam*. Such a belief surrounds the observer with a rich atmosphere charged with the potential of God's holiness.

Building Community

Living a life of mitzvot brings us into community, one might even say communion, with our fellow Jews. The *performance* of mitzvot weaves a cloth of deeds that can join us to every other Jew. The mitzvot are our flag, our colors, that identify us as one family. Performing mitzvot gives us a piece of the corporate identity. Many Jews today keep the mitzvot out of a sense of belonging, or a desire to belong. For more than anything else, people need to belong. This sense of belonging has held many a generation of Jews together, and inspired many a Jew to observe mitzvot. For to be a Jew is to act like a Jew. ⁹⁴

Some people tell us that our acts should be grounded more firmly in beliefs; that we should contemplate, deliberate, weigh, judge and only then act. One of the most hurtful and condemnatory charges we can fling at one another is "hypocrite" - where we charge that action does not match belief. Since we believe that rituals are expressions of belief, we tend to believe that if we do not have faith, we should not observe.

Many ritual mitzvot can be done only in a certain place, only with a certain object, only at a certain time of year, only at a certain time of day. But *mitzvot bein adam l'havero* can be done anytime and anywhere, with almost anything.

These "social" mitzvot are often divided into two categories: *tzedakah*, those involving our money, and *gemilut hesed*, those involving our money, our time and our compassion.

Maimonides provides us with the classic list of the eight levels of *tzedakah*. They are, from highest to lowest:

8) One who strengthens the earning capacity of another by giving them a gift, or a loan, or bringing them into partnership with oneself, or finding them work so that they no longer need handouts from others.

7) One who gives to those in need without knowing to whom they are giving, and without the recipient knowing from whom they are receiving.

6) One who gives knowing whom the recipient will be while the recipient does not know who the giver is.

5) One who receives knowing from whom they are benefitting, while the giver does not know to whom they are giving.

4) One who gives without being asked.

3) One who gives after being asked.

2) One who gives less than they can but with kindness.

1) One who gives grudgingly. (Mishneh Torah, Matanot Ani'im, ch. 10)

3. A mensch treats everyone decently. When a man who served as the White House stenographer for over forty years retired, he was asked which president he enjoyed working for the most. He answered that Harry Truman was his favorite because he was the only president who called him by his name.

A mensch doesn't treat anyone like hired help—even hired help.

4. When a friend is sick, experiences a divorce, tragedy, or death in the family, no matter how busy, a mensch takes the time to call or visit. A mensch reaches out to people who ache instead of running away.

A mensch doesn't disappoint.

5. Do the people closest to us see us angrier about rush hour traffic and the housekeeper folding our laundry improperly than we are over racism, pollution, or violence?

A mensch knows the difference between real problems and minor annoyances.

6. One of the most famous sayings in all of Judaism is by Rabbi Hillel in the Talmud: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" This was Hillel's plea for a life balanced between personal and communal obligations, appreciating the urgency of both.

A mensch gives more money to charity than he or she can afford and more time to the community than he or she has to spare, but somehow always manages to be home when needed.

7. Maybe we don't use the "N" word in our homes. But what words do we use—fag, dyke, bitch, schwartze, goy? Whoever said "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me", was wrong.

We can wound with words; a mensch is careful not to.

1. Remember what success really means. As Rabbi Neil Kirshan points out: "The Talmud states that when a child is born, it is visited by an angel who requires that the child take a simple oath: 'Be righteous, and never be wicked.' A child is not asked to be brilliant, cute, athletic, or popular. A child is asked to become kind, honest, understanding."

A mensch worries more about being better than about being better off.

2. Do we tell our children to be honest but sneak them into the movies for the under-twelve price when they're twelve and a half? Do we tell them we're going out to a meeting, and they later find out we went to dinner and a movie? Do we tell them to be lawful and then park in the handicapped spot? Do we tell our kids to be kind to their brothers and sisters, while we haven't spoken to our own siblings in months? Do our children hear us say we care about the poor and then watch us ignore their outstretched hands and their hungry eyes as we walk by them in our Armani and our Chanel?

A mensch is always a mensch, in word and in deed.

"God has a purpose for everything, even a snake, even a gnat, even a frog."

GENESIS RABBAH

Lazy

"A useless pet that does nothing but float in poopie water all day" is how my sister, Marilyn, describes her son Mathew's pet frog Lazy. Marilyn agreed to buy Lazy for Mathew ten years ago when, as a determined third-grader, he told her he really wanted a frog. At first, Mathew's prospects looked grim. The only frogs sold in Milwaukee pet stores required a steady diet of either live crickets or bloodworms. Marilyn wasn't breeding either in her house. There would be no frog.

But Mathew persisted, and after some research Marilyn discovered Grow-A-Frog; a neat little establishment that mails you a tadpole that evolves into a hybrid African frog. Unlike its American frog cousins, this African variety could subsist on dried food pellets and remain in water its entire life. Having observed it many times, if you ask me, hybrid is far too kind a word for this creature. Basically, it's a fat, slimy, ugly thing that stares out of a little plastic aquarium and does nothing, absolutely nothing. Hence, Mathew's decision to name his plump amphibious friend "Lazy."

Lazy has escaped death several times in his ten years as part of my sister's family. Once, while my brother-in-law, Bob, was changing the water in the aquarium, Lazy slithered out into the sink and down the garbage disposal. Bob's hand was too big to reach in and rescue Lazy, and everyone else in the family was out of town. Bob had to stay up all night dechlorinating water and pouring it into the disposal so Lazy wouldn't crisp up. When morning finally came, he called a plumber to disassemble the pipes.

Then there was the time Lazy plopped out of his container and slimed his way under the microwave. Mathew picked up the microwave and told Marilyn to grab Lazy, but when the moment of truth arrived she was too grossed out to touch him. Mathew did a quick hand-off of the microwave and tried to catch Lazy himself. In the meantime, Lazy slimed the entire kitchen while the dog tried to eat him and my sister screamed from her perch on top of a chair.

Mathew could just dump Lazy in the pond across the street from his house and be done with it. But he knows that, being an African frog, Lazy would be a goner come winter. He could put him up for adoption, but Mathew's parents won't hear of it—not because they like the "wretched creature," as my sister calls him, but because they are trying to teach Mathew a lesson.

At eight years old, Mathew agreed to be responsible for a living creature, and that responsibility, as Marilyn puts it, "is not something you flush, give, dump, or throw away." Lazy, in all his floating, poopie glory, is Mathew's until he croaks—I mean, dies. Which, according to the woman at Grow-A-Frog who sells the food pellets, might not be for another ten or fifteen years.