

"More Than Words"

Defining Kavvanah in Prayer

Study Session

Heshvan 2006

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains background materials and a facilitator guide. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

Questions? Send them to: koach@uscj.org

FACILITATOR GUIDE

Overview and Objective:

This program is based on a *Talmudic* text which discusses the importance of one's *kavvanah* (intention) when reciting the *Shema*. It's important to note that the text makes the assumption that a person may be reading through a Torah scroll looking for scribal errors when the time for the recitation of the *Shema* comes.

Although the majority of us do not spend our mornings checking Torah scrolls for scribal errors, the issue of what our intention is when we pray is still very relevant. When we read the words of the *siddur*, do we read them in the same way we read while checking our assignments for spelling mistakes? Do we passively take the words in as we do a street sign or billboard as we drive by? When we pray do we skim the text like an article for a class that we don't really like, or do we engage ourselves in the words and the meaning? Do we actively involve ourselves in the prayers of the *siddur*, or do we passively allow them to pass through our lips? These are the same questions which the rabbis of the *Talmud* struggled with in determining what type of *kavvanah* is needed to fulfill one's obligation in prayer.

In Part One you will facilitate a creative exercise and discussion meant to focus on the varying degrees of intent people give to the words they read.

Part Two is a text study and discussion of the Talmudic text explained above, as well as a text on *kavvanah* by Abraham Joshua Heschel. Use this as a time to delve into the deeper theological and philosophical questions of *kavvanah* and prayer.

Part Three is an exercise taking the lessons of Talmudic discussion and argument, bringing them to life in a fun and imaginative way; this activity can be another way of approaching our text.

Although this material is presented in a progression, you need not follow the format from beginning to end—feel free to have fun with it and be creative.

Part Two: Back to the Sources— A Talmudic Look at *Kavvanah*

Directions: Break into *hevrotot* (study pairs or small groups). Read the texts and spend some time reflecting on the questions. Come back together as a large group, and share what you discussed in your *hevrotot*.

משנה:

היה קורא בתורה והגיע זמן המקרא אם כוון לבו יצא ואם
לאו לא יצא

Hayah Koreih Ba'Torah: If one was reciting (the sections of the *Shema*) in the Torah—and the time arrived (for the recital of the *Shema*), if he directed his heart/mind (on the passage) he has fulfilled his obligation (of the recitation) and if not, he has not fulfilled his obligation.

(*Mishnah Berakhot 2:1*)

גמרא דף יג:

מצות צריכות כוונה מאי אם כוון לבו לקרות לקרות

"*Mitzvot need intention*" The *Gemara* refers back to the *Mishnah* and asks: what is the meaning of "If he directed his heart?" *Likrot*: The *Gemara* answers he must simply be reading the *Shema* (but not be reading it to correct mistakes in the Torah scroll).

(*Talmud Berakhot 13a*)

"Commentators have been puzzled at the passage in the *Amidah* ('the silent prayer'), 'for Thou hearest in mercy the prayer of every mouth'. We would expect the phrase to be 'the prayer of every heart.' But the passage, we are told, is intended to remind us that it is the mercy of God to accept even prayers that come only from the mouth as lip-service, without inner devotion. However, this remark in no way denies the principle that *kavvanah*, or inner participation, is indispensable to prayer. It is a principle that found a precise expression in the medieval saying 'Prayer without *kavvanah* is like a body without a soul'.

Yet what is the nature of *kavvanah* or inner participation? Is it paying attention to the context of the fixed texts? Thinking?

(Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* 11-12)

Questions on the Texts

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10
(1-not even looking at the words) (10-focused intently on each word)

1. What kind of intent (on a scale of 1-10) is required for the recitation of the *Shema* according to this text?
2. Do you agree with the amount of intent the text requires? Do you think it should be more? Less? Why or why not?
3. In the last text, the *Talmud* understands the phrase "*Im kivein libo*" ("If he directed his heart") as not reading in order to correct mistakes in the Torah scroll. Are there other ways that we could interpret this phrase? How do you understand this phrase?
4. Using the *Talmud's* interpretation of "*Im kivein libo*" do you feel that you always "direct your heart" when you pray? Using **your** interpretation (if it differs from the *Talmud's*) do you feel that you always "direct your heart when you pray?"
5. Heschel asks. "What is the nature of *kavanah* or inner participation? Is it paying attention to the context of the fixed texts? Thinking?" How would you answer these questions?

Part Three—The Living Talmud:

Directions: The rabbis of the *Talmud* engaged in debates and deep conversations about the issues which we have been discussing, and many others, in the forum of the *Talmud*. This is an exercise in bringing the *Talmud* to life through creating your own page of *Talmud* as a group.

How to do it: The following page is blank, except for one piece of text in the center of the page. Divide everyone into groups of approximately 5. Print one page for each of the groups. In the groups give each individual approximately 2-3 minutes to read the text (and other people's comments on the text) and add his or her own comments to the page. At the end of the exercise, you should have what looks like a page of *Talmud*, but this time, it has your perspectives, your questions, your comments.

Shabbat Friendly:

If you are doing this program on Shabbat then try passing the text around the table and giving each person a chance to respond to it with their gut reactions, and thoughts. They can also respond to what other people around the table have said.

**Food For Thought: This text is actually related to why we have *Pesukei D'zimrah* (Psalms of Praise) in the morning before we jump right into the *Shaharit* service.

Ain omdin l'hitpallel: One should not rise to pray (the Amidah/18 Benedictions) except amid an attitude of reverence. The early pious ones would tarry for one hour and (then) pray—in order that they might direct their hearts to their Father in Heaven.

Definitions and Biographies:

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972): Profession of Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Heschel was one of the outstanding philosophers, theologians, activists, and internationally acclaimed authors of our time.

Talmud: A defining book of rabbinic religious literature—a compilation of the *Mishnah* (collection of rabbinic legal teachings compiled by Yehudah HaNasi), with its attendant rabbinic commentary, referred to as the *Gemara*. These two parts (the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*) together create what is referred to as the *Talmud*.

Pesukei D'zimrah: Psalms of Praise recited in the morning as a “warm-up” to prayer.

Additional Resources:

Man's Quest For God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism, Abraham Joshua Heschel

Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service, Reuven Hammer

Hineini in Our Lives: Learning How to Respond to Others Using 14 Biblical Texts & Personal Stories, Norman J. Cohen