

## November 2015 Message from Rabbi Dubin

How exciting it is for me to be writing this month's message as – for the first time – your officially installed rabbi! While I believe in thanking people for good works, in this case, because so many of you have gone to such enormous lengths to make me feel welcomed and valued, I will refrain from singling out any particular congregants by name out of an abundance of confidence that I would invariably forget to include someone. So... **TODAH RABBAH** (“Thank you very much”) to the **ENTIRE COMMUNITY** of the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey! I am grateful beyond words for the chance to become part of this community.

Being your rabbi is both an absolute honor and – to be perfectly honest – a bit daunting. How do I know that I am up to the task?

In *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel asks:

“Now what qualifies a person to be a rabbi? What gives him the right, the privilege to represent the word of God to the people of God?” Then, responding to his own question, he continues: “If the main purpose of being a rabbi is to bring men closer to their “Father in Heaven,” then one of his supreme tasks is to pray and to teach others how to pray. To be a Jew implies the preeminence of prayer. To be able to inspire people to pray one must love his people, understand their predicaments and be sensitive to the power of exaltation, purification, and sanctification hidden in our Prayer Book.

To attain such sensitivity he must commune with the great masters of the past, and learn how to pour his own dreams and anxieties into the well of prayer.”

Prayer is a funny thing, because even though we all read the same words from the same *siddur* (prayer book), as individuals, we each bring something unique to how these words can be understood.

About this tension, Heschel writes:

“There is a specific difficulty of Jewish prayer. There are laws: how to pray, when to pray, what to pray. There are fixed times, fixed ways, fixed texts [in Hebrew, we call this concept of fixed words and times, *keva*]. On the other hand, prayer is worship of the heart, the outpouring of the soul, a matter of *kavanah* (inner devotion). Thus, Jewish prayer is guided by two opposite principles: order and outburst, regularity and spontaneity, uniformity and individuality, law and freedom, a duty and a prerogative, empathy and self expression, insight and sensitivity, creed and faith, the word and that which is beyond words. These principles are the two poles about which Jewish prayer revolves. Since each of the two moves in the opposite direction, equilibrium can only be maintained if both are of equal force...

Thus, Maimonides declares: "Prayer without *kavanah* is no prayer at all. He who has prayed without *kavanah* ought to pray once more. He whose thoughts are wandering or occupied with other things need not pray until he has recovered his mental composure..." How grateful I am to God that there is a duty to worship, a law to remind my distraught mind that it is time to think of God, time to disregard my ego for at least a moment! It is such happiness to belong to an order of the divine will. I am not always in a mood to pray. I do not always have the vision and the strength to say a word in the presence of God. But when I am weak, it is the law that gives me strength; when my vision is dim, it is duty that gives me insight." ([\*The Spirit of Jewish Prayer: Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America – 1953\*](#))

You have noticed, I'm sure, that one of the privileges I particularly value from the bima is the opportunity to frame our worship experience by offering introductions to different prayers. I find that by infusing intentions that are framed through a traditional Jewish lens in the context of today's world, we are able to maintain clear relevancy and connection to our ancient liturgy. This is why the kinds of short introductions that I offer are called *kavanot* (plural of *kavanah*). Yes, there is an actual rabbinic name for them. And yes, intention does matter!

As we look forward to our future prayer-life together, I extend what is both an offer and also a request: While I am the rabbi of this congregation, it is and always will be your congregation.

Your individual voices need to be heard, because only when they are, will our entire collective voice be elevated fully. Please, come help us grow spiritually. Come help us find ourselves in prayer. Come help us elevate the *keva* of what we do by bringing your own *kavanot* to what we do.

If you are interested in offering your own 100-word *kavana* during a future Shabbat service, please let me know at [RabbiDubin@jcnwj.org](mailto:RabbiDubin@jcnwj.org). I would be grateful for the opportunity to talk it through with you and help make it happen any way I can. I – and the rest of the congregation – look forward to learning from you and finding new inspiration.

Rabbi Dubin

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