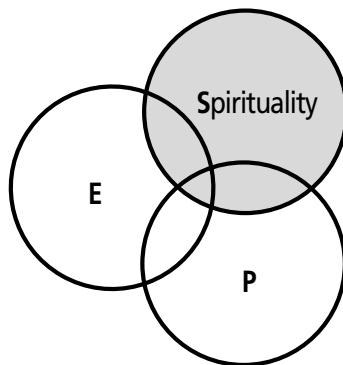


## Chapter 4

# “There’s No Spirituality for Me in Synagogues and Prayer”

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Many people told me that finding spirituality in Judaism was, to put it mildly, a challenge. The problem: The traditional Jewish modes of access to spirituality and God — namely, prayer, synagogues, temples, and rabbis — just don’t reach or touch them.

I was able to relate to much of what I heard in this department. Over the years, I have tried (and continue to try) to have my spiritual needs met at services. I have been only partially successful.

Unfortunately, I heard from many who have experienced no success and have stopped trying. They told me that services offer them little or nothing that they consider spiritual or meaningful. To address these issues, Jewish institutions of spirituality have some demanding work ahead of them. Personally, I would like to see some significant changes.

But even as I say that, still I believe that Judaism today has much to offer spiritually. This chapter suggests ways you may find some spiritual nourishment through synagogues, temples, prayer, and rabbis.

## Amy

Amy just had her third child and is thrilled. Her baby is a girl after two boys, and as she said, “At 43, there were not going to be any more tries.” Her boys are four and seven. She’s actually a little too thrilled, because her excitement has created a problem for her. When each of her babies was born, she was torn over whether to return to work as a successful advertising executive. Each time she lamented the time away from her babies. Now this is her last baby, and she is again planning to return to work, but with each passing day she feels less and less inclined to return.

Still, she and her husband have come to depend on her salary. Beyond that, however, returning appeals to her because she loves her work. It is easy to see why she is successful: She is a ball of energy and charisma. In addition to these personal attributes, she has a well-defined professional philosophy: “I love helping people articulate and then deliver a clear and focused message.”

Both in her work and in her personal life, I could see that she likes straight talk and detests wasting time. In sum, that is why she feels angry about going to the synagogue. She considers herself to be a spiritual person but finds that “almost none of my spirit is touched or fed by Jewish prayer or services. And usually, the rabbis just don’t talk to me.”

When we were finished speaking, she found a direct mail piece she had received and saved from an area church that offers “hip” pastors, relevant messages, great day care, cool music, and a casual atmosphere. Waving the piece, she said, “I’ve been tempted to go there, but I don’t really want to. I love being Jewish; I just wish I could find something Jewish like this. In a

way, this reminds me of the many wonderful Jewish experiences I had at Jewish summer camps. I miss that Jewish feeling and spirit we had at camp."

She said she's pretty much stopped going to services because "they are a waste of my time and I don't have time to waste." Still, she feels guilty and would like to find a place for her family. She and her husband joined a synagogue so they could enroll their kids in the nursery school. "The school was nurturing and wonderful, but — I know this is a bit of an exaggeration — still, it seems that synagogues only seem to know how to nourish people's souls if they are under the age of five."

Amy: There is a running joke in our family that when I was 10 years old, my parents made me start going to the synagogue. I came home after the first day and told my parents that I couldn't stand services. They said to me, "The day will come when you will thank us for making you go." Every year since then, and I'm now 43, after High Holiday services, I say to my parents, "I'm still waiting for the day to come."

*Gil: What's the problem?*

Amy: To me, the synagogue is a waste of time. The whole synagogue thing hardly ever works for me... which is the main reason I seldom go. You know, now I'm in "the house of God," boom, am I supposed to feel something?

*Gil: So what do you feel?*

Amy: Usually bored or frustrated.

*Gil: Because?*

Amy: There are a whole bunch of reasons. First, matters of God and spirituality are not something I can instantly get in touch with, just because I'm at a service. On top of that, I find prayer to be almost meaningless — I have a very hard time relating to that language. I also have mixed feelings about the rabbi. And as if that were not enough,

I feel like an incompetent klutz at the synagogue. Then, to add insult to injury, asking us to pay a huge amount of money in dues is offensive and wrong. Who do they think they are?

*Gil: Is that all?*

Amy: Isn't that enough?

*Gil: Yeah, I was just kidding. What would you say if I told you I share many of your frustrations?*

Amy: I thought you were a synagogue regular.

*Gil: Depends what you call a regular. I do often show up on a Saturday morning — purposely late. I usually come for less than an hour of the service. I seldom have patience for more than that. There are parts of being at the synagogue that I obviously like — such as seeing friends — or I wouldn't go. Still, I can relate to many of the things you have said. It's very easy for me to see why people do not come to services. I have to work very hard to eke some meaning out of the service, and I have to say I often fail — and I'm trying. If I were less motivated, I think I'd always fail. So I find many of the reasons you mentioned fit for me. I take what you have to say seriously.*

Amy: My reasons are very serious. I'd also say that I doubt I'm going to feel differently, even if we talk about these issues.

*Gil: That could be. Like I say, I've also had a difficult time struggling with some of the same issues and still do. I can't say that I have great answers for all these issues, but I've found answers to some of them, and for others I'm still looking. Through it all, though, I've*

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**“I’ve wondered what a Martian would think if he were plopped in the middle of a Jewish service. I think I know, because I feel like a Martian there.”**

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*concluded that the goal of Jewish worship and spirituality is to help us become better people. I like that goal. But I wouldn’t care to force my answers on you. Matters of spirituality are quite personal.*

Amy: I appreciate that, but you don’t have to worry about me. If the answers don’t make sense to me, I’ll tell you or I’ll just ask you more questions. Still, I could use some answers because I’d like my children to be bar mitzvahed someday, and it would be nice to have those bar mitzvahs at a synagogue where I could find some warmth and spiritual fulfillment. To be honest, though, I’m not sure that’s realistic. When it comes to synagogues, I just have so many issues.

Gil: *One thing you said is that “you feel like a klutz at the synagogue.” What did you mean by that?*

Amy: I’d say that one big reason is the language. And don’t tell me to try a temple where most of the service is in English. I have tried that and, even still, there is always some Hebrew. I read Hebrew like a preschooler and I pronounce it even worse. Plus, even in English the prayers are meaningless to me, and I really don’t understand what’s going on during the service... bowing and marching and Torah kissing, and on and on. I’ve wondered what a Martian would think if he were plopped in the middle of a Jewish service. I think I know, because I feel like a Martian there. Compare this to how I feel in my professional life, where I like to believe I’m a competent and capable person. Now are you surprised I don’t enjoy the synagogue?

Gil: *No, I’m not surprised. What you said makes perfect sense to me. But how did you become competent at work?*

Amy: I went to college, and I learned a lot on the job — from colleagues and mostly by learning from mistakes. I see where you’re going with this — but I think the prayer service is a lot different than my career. To start with, I don’t conduct my work life in a foreign language that I don’t understand.

*Gil: You're right about the language... which I have some thoughts on, that can wait. Still, I think the analogy fits — in fact, your career is probably more complicated than the service. I've found that the service is actually pretty simple and can be explained, believe it or not, in a matter of minutes. Figuring out what's going on is not rocket science... but you'll need to ask some questions. The logical person to ask is a rabbi. But you said you have mixed feelings about rabbis. What's that about?*

Amy: By and large, I think rabbis are good people who mean well. But in my personal and professional life, I care a lot about messages and how they are communicated. I have very little patience for a message I can't relate to, and I get particularly irritated when that message is communicated poorly. That's why, when it comes to rabbis, I often feel that we're not connecting.

*Gil: Are you saying you can't relate to rabbis' messages or to the way they communicate those messages?*

Amy: Both. Usually, that is. Though as a teenager, I was very impressed with our rabbi—he was always talking about the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war and a sense of right and wrong. And his delivery was so powerful and captivating. He truly inspired me. But that was an exception for me. Even though the rabbis I have met personally seem like sensitive and nice people, most of the rabbis I've heard over the years don't talk to me — though they certainly know how to talk and talk and talk.

*Gil: So do talk shows.*

Amy: That's true, but I would call that entertainment.

*Gil: Me, too, but I think most of us have gotten pretty used to being entertained by talk. And if it's not entertaining, we tune it out... unless, of course, it can be said in 20 seconds. Our expectations nowadays are pretty high.*

Amy: Wait a minute, no pun intended, are you trying to blame me for being bored by rabbis? Wouldn’t you say that’s blaming the victim?

Gil: *Yes and no. There is no question that some rabbis can speak and some can’t. But you can find one that does speak to you... in a reasonable amount of time.*

Amy: That’s a lot easier said than done. I find rabbis are unapproachable.

Gil: *I used to share that opinion with you, but now I don’t think that it’s fair to generalize about rabbis like that. I’ve found that an approachable rabbi is a matter of personality and chemistry. For example, I’ve met rabbis who like to be called Rabbi and I’ve met others who like*

*to be called by their first name. Doctors are the same way. And many people prefer one choice over the other. You need to find someone whose personal style is compatible with yours.*

Amy: It’s not just style. It seems that rabbis at synagogues are so busy “running” the place that they don’t pay attention to the people.

Gil: *I’ve actually talked to several rabbis about that. I have yet to meet a rabbi whose “calling” to the rabbinate was because he or she wanted to become an administrator. It seems that many congregations look for their rabbi to become a chief operating officer instead of a teacher and spiritual leader.*

Amy: I will say it’s hard to imagine an inspired young rabbinical student dreaming of someday doing his or her life work governed by a board

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**“It seems that many congregations look for their rabbi to become a chief operating officer instead of a teacher and spiritual leader.”**

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of directors. Still, that's reality. Combine that with the style issue I mentioned before, I just don't think I could find a rabbi for me.

*Gil: I think you could if you wanted to, but it might take a little searching on your part.*

Amy: Okay, let's say I was willing to search for a rabbi for me. I still don't find that rabbis talk to me.

*Gil: Personally, I have found that to be true and not true.*

Amy: What do you mean?

*Gil: Well, most of the rabbis I have met seem to love answering questions. After all, the word "rabbi" means teacher. When I've asked rabbis questions about things that matter to me, I have found I can usually connect. Not only that, I've learned many things from rabbis that I believe have made me a better person. From the pulpit, unfortunately, I am often disappointed. Too often it seems to me that the rabbi is giving a sermon that would be great if the whole congregation was made up of other rabbis. That aggravates me. It's as if they're oblivious to the audience. The rabbis I can relate to speak in plain English about current events, the books, the movies, the business dilemmas, relationship questions, and other parts of life I have questions about — and what Judaism has to say about these issues.*

Amy: When rabbis speak about those issues, I do find value in their sermons. But more often than not, to me, the rabbis' comments seem out of touch with the way regular people lead their lives today. This discussion reminds me of a joke I heard about a farmer whose chickens were dying, so he went to the rabbi for advice. The rabbi told him to take away the water from his chickens for a few days. The farmer came back a few days later and said even more of his chickens had died. So the rabbi told him to give the water back to the chickens and take away their food for a few days. The farmer came back a few days later and said, "Rabbi, I've been following all of your advice and my chickens continue to die. Do you have any more advice?" And the

rabbi said, “I have plenty more advice. Do you have any more chickens?” My point is that I’m not sure I’m really interested in what Moses or anyone else in the Bible or the rabbi has to say about my life.

*Gil: I can understand why you might say that, and that’s a pretty good joke, too. On the other hand, I’ve spoken to people who have expressed similar sentiments but later in the conversation tell me they would be curious to hear what rabbis think on many subjects. For example, they would like to hear rabbis honestly speak about whether or not they believe in God — and then to define God.*

Amy: That would intrigue me.

*Gil: I don’t think you would have a hard time coming up with a number of issues that would intrigue you.*

Amy: Well, I have wondered about what Judaism says about fetal research or, on the other end of the continuum, life after death or ethical business practices or single-parent adoptions — actually, a lot of things.

*Gil: Like I said, there is no shortage of issues. And I agree with you, finding a rabbi who can relate and talk to you is not easy. I think part of the solution is that we have to change our expectations.*

Amy: What do you mean?

*Gil: I mean that getting direction about a challenging issue may be difficult to do quickly. That does not mean I think rabbis need more than 20 minutes to address a topic or need to speak in language that only a professor or another rabbi can relate to. I personally can’t stand that. But I don’t expect 60-second explanations either. Learning and getting some spiritual satisfaction should be enjoyable, but it’s not exactly like entertainment or instant results, like throwing a bag of popcorn in the microwave.*

Amy: All right. I can accept what you're saying — except speaking as a marketing and communications professional, I believe a message can and should be conveyed in 15 minutes or less. But as I told you, my problems with the synagogue go beyond the rabbi. I hardly ever get anything out of the prayer book or prayer, for that matter. It's not learning, it's not enjoyable, it's not entertainment, and the last thing it is for me is spiritual.

Gil: *You said "hardly ever." When have you gotten something out of the prayer book?*

Amy: Sometimes on the High Holidays, when I'm thinking about what I did during the year and how I could be a better person, I can feel moved by some of the prayers. But I'm in a different frame of mind at those times. I know the service is coming, and it just seems a lot more serious to me.

Gil: *It makes sense to me that you would find that a spiritual experience. Just as it made sense to me that you don't feel competent when you're at the service. I once heard a good explanation: opera and football.*

Amy: Excuse me, but you just lost me.

Gil: *If you were to take the average person off the street and make them sit in the front row of an Italian opera for two hours, what would that person get out of the opera?*

Amy: Probably a strong desire to hurt me — badly.

Gil: *Hopefully not, but they would not likely get very much out of what they experienced. Something like this did actually happen at a football game. The way I heard the story, President Nixon "treated" Secretary General Brezhnev of the ex-Soviet Union to an NFL football game. After the game, Brezhnev was asked at a press conference what he thought of the game. He responded, "All fall down, all get up. All fall down, all get up." That's all an unprepared person got out of America's most popular spectator sport.*

Amy: That’s a cute story... sounds like my husband. He is always telling me that I’m missing an entire dimension of life because I have almost no interest or understanding of team sports. Now I suppose you’re going to tell me that this is the same as prayer.

Gil: *Not exactly. The similarity is that football, opera, and prayer will be meaningless unless you prepare for what you’re about to experience. Worse yet, they will probably bore you to tears. The good news is that the opposite can be true if you prepare. Like you say, they can offer you an entire dimension of life. But with prayer, it ain’t easy. Personally, I find football is a lot easier.*

Amy: So maybe that’s why the High Holiday service sometimes is meaningful for me.

Gil: *I think so. You said you were in the right frame of mind ahead of time. This may seem strange, but it sounds like you were kind of “psyched up” for a spiritual experience. You were ready to think about how you acted over the past year and how you might change in the coming year.*

Amy: But that’s only on the High Holidays — and only occasionally, at that. On a regular basis, this just doesn’t work for me.

Gil: *Why?*

Amy: I’d say mostly because of the stiff language of the prayer book, and the whole God idea there I find difficult or impossible to believe.

Gil: *What’s the “God idea” that you find so hard to believe?*

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**“I hardly ever get anything out of the prayer book or prayer, for that matter. It’s not learning, it’s not enjoyable, it’s not entertainment, and the last thing it is for me is spiritual.”**

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Amy: You know, God will hear my prayers and do things for me. This God of the prayer book who intercedes and performs miracles. I just don't buy it.

Gil: *I tend to agree with you. I have a different way of looking at prayer and God that I want to tell you about. But first I wanted to mention something a rabbi once pointed out to me. He told me I was wrong to talk about "a" God of the prayer book.*

Amy: What did he mean?

Gil: *He pointed out to me that there are more than 100 metaphors for God in the prayer book.*

Amy: One hundred? For example?

Gil: *If you're interested — or bored the next time you're at services — start paging through the prayer book. There's God the life force, the Creator of nature, the Provider, the Giver of wisdom, the Rock, Parent, Healer, Sustainer, Shepherd — you could go on and on.*

Amy: Even if I could find that in the language of the prayer book, that still sounds too much like a person or an object for me. I'm not sure these metaphors would do anything for me, because I just don't believe God is up there listening to prayers and answering.

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**"I wouldn't confidently say what God is or is not, does or doesn't do — because I just don't know...  
I have a hard time believing God is like a genie granting wishes."**

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*Gil: There is obviously no way to prove one way or another what God is doing or not doing. But I’ll tell you about something that happened to me.*

Amy: I hope you’re not going to tell me that God came to you one night and personally spoke to you.

*Gil: No, it was during breakfast. Actually, what I was going to say is that my wife and I had twins who were born three months prematurely.*

Amy: Three months? Oh my God, how small were they?

*Gil: My daughter dropped to two pounds, but actually my son, who was nine ounces bigger, was in much more critical condition. Anyway, what I was going to say is that they were both on respirators and in bad shape in the intensive care unit of our local children’s hospital. We were afraid to name them after relatives at first, because we thought the babies might die. A lot of Jewish and non-Jewish friends and even mere acquaintances told us that they were praying for us. And I have to say, though I admit this sounds like the Twilight Zone or something, I could almost tangibly feel all those people praying. I can’t say what God heard or did, but it sure gave us strength, and I believe that it helped them get better.*

Amy: I could see how you gained strength, and how that helped your twins. But I have a very tough time believing God gained anything or intervened.

*Gil: I’m not sure I believe that either, though I heard a beautiful saying once that human beings are God’s language. I would modify it a little to say that kind human actions are God’s language.*

Amy: That’s a nice thought.

*Gil: It moves me. Still, again I wouldn’t confidently say what God is or is not, does or doesn’t do — because I just don’t know. As I said, I have a hard time believing God is like a genie granting wishes. I have a different notion of God and prayer.*

Amy: Yes?

Gil: *I think more in terms of finding help, direction, or strength from God, the silent partner.*

Amy: Don't you think that is just your conscience acting as a silent partner?

Gil: *Maybe. I have thought that. But then I've wondered, where does conscience come from? Then I made a discovery that further influenced my thinking about this: The Hebrew word "to pray" is correctly translated as "to judge or examine yourself."*

Amy: Are you suggesting that I think of prayer as self-examination or reflection time?

Gil: *If you want to. Personally, I usually find the silent meditation section of the service to be the most meaningful part for me. But as I said, how you feel about prayer and God is very personal. I wouldn't presume to tell you what is correct for you. You did say, though, that on the High Holidays, the self-examination approach seems to work for you.*

Amy: That's true, but that's once a year. On a regular basis, frankly, I'm not the type to get into "meditation" and self-examination.

Gil: *I didn't think I was either, but I've come to the realization that I probably do it more often than I thought. I wouldn't be surprised if you're the same way.*

Amy: What do you mean?

Gil: *To me, prayer is when I think about things bigger than me. A moment or more when I consciously marvel at something inspirational, or when I'm grateful for health or good fortune, or reflect on how to become better or to look for sources of strength beyond me to get over fear or discomfort. Prayer can take a lot of forms for me.*

Amy: If that’s how you’re defining prayer, then you’re right, I think I already do that, probably not enough really. But I do marvel at things — like how much food comes out of my puny little garden, how my kids are growing, or how regular the tides are — all kinds of things, but I never considered any of these thoughts prayer. I’ve always thought of Jewish prayer as asking God to change things for us.

Gil: *I suspect some people pray that way. As for me, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, I’m far from confident that prayer makes God change the world, but I do think prayer can change people.*

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**“I don’t think many adults pray for a new car. Like deep down, we know that doesn’t seem right...”**

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Amy: Like how?

Gil: *I think prayer helps people get in touch with what really matters in their heart of hearts. For example, even though most adults spend their daily life driven to accumulate money, I don’t think many adults pray for a new car. Like deep down, we know that doesn’t seem right, because a car doesn’t really matter.*

Amy: I’ve heard jokes about praying to win the lottery.

Gil: *So have I, but we know they’re jokes. Can you imagine actually getting on your knees and praying for your stocks to go up?*

Amy: There is something pathetic about that. No one has ever discussed prayer like this with me before. To get used to this would take some adjusting of my thinking. But I still don’t think I need the synagogue to pray — especially if the point is self-reflection.

Gil: *You don’t. Judaism says you can pray by yourself. But there is no question that Judaism finds value in praying in a group. For that matter, so do Christianity, Islam, Native American religions, and*

*others. There can be something powerful and spiritual about praying together with others who are praying. Plus, I don't think self-reflection is the only goal — being connected to others and thinking about others is also a Jewish goal of prayer. On top of that, there is something to be said for structure.*

Amy: Structure? I don't think I like the sound of that.

Gil: *It does sound a little harsh. I think structure is one of the things people resent about organized religion. But in this case, I don't have a problem. I think Judaism realized that human nature is to take things for granted — that is, until we no longer have them. So to get us to appreciate what we have and to get in touch with our spirituality, structured into Jewish life are places to worship with others and a schedule of daily prayer services.*

Amy: So we will regularly examine our lives?

Gil: *That's the plan, at least. Judaism says if we do that daily — not just on the High Holidays — we will become better people. It's sort of like exercise — our daily spiritual workout. To be honest, even though I respect Jewish thinking on this subject, I've got to admit I'm not one to get into any kind of regular exercise routine — physical or spiritual. I feel better after I do it, but I'm seldom crazy about the idea.*

Amy: That makes two of us. And I certainly don't get anything out of going to a structured place of worship with a prayer book to get my "spiritual exercise." I don't mean to sound like I'm not interested in becoming a better person. There are times I really do appreciate a session of self-examination. I think the Jewish ideal is admirable, but if I were to "force" myself to pray daily, especially with a prayer book, the only exercise I think I'd get would be in frustration.

Gil: *I know what you mean. Still, I've found a prayer that almost always works — even if you don't believe in God.*

Amy: Sounds good...

*Gil: I’m talking about prayer that focuses on what we already have. I can do this with or without a prayer book.*

Amy: What do you mean?

*Gil: Like lying in bed at night before I go to sleep, I like to do sort of a quick inventory of the big things in life that I feel grateful to have, like health, my kids, and my family. Like I said, I don’t know if my feeling thankful does anything for God, but I do think it helps me be a better person. It helps me appreciate “having,” and those who do not have.*

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**“I’ve found a prayer that almost always works — even if you don’t believe in God.”**

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Amy: That sounds fine to me. I think I do that, too, from time to time, but how do you do that with a prayer book? Those words seem so meaningless.

*Gil: For me, that’s a lot harder — but it can be done.*

Amy: Why bother? I mean, why should I invest all the time and effort to find meaning in the prayer book?

*Gil: That’s a tough question. I think part of the answer is that there is value in a prepared script, even if you’re planning to ad lib. I think you can also find guidance in the prayer book by seeing what have been priorities for our people over the ages when they searched for spirituality. I think one of the easiest places to see this is in the blessings. They don’t ask God anything. They express wonder and thanks. The morning blessings are good examples. They talk about things like the morning sun, how our bodies work, and so on. In Hebrew these prayers are called the Bircote Hashachar.*

Amy: Hold it. Before we talk any more about the prayer book, I want to talk about the language issue already. I told you how I feel about

Hebrew. I don't know Hebrew. I can barely read Hebrew. No parlez vous Hebrew. Comprendre?

*Gil: I get it, and I have three suggestions. The first one you probably won't be wild about. Unfortunately, there is no way to learn another language without work. The work can be enjoyable or it can be a drag, depending on how motivated you are and how good you are at it.*

Amy: Well, I'm not good at it and I'm not very motivated. So give me the second suggestion.

*Gil: Okay. This one may be a bit of a stretch and may sound a little bizarre, but for some people there can actually be something spiritual about hearing but not understanding the "holy" language. You sort of let yourself mentally drift. Like have you ever heard a Latin mass?*

Amy: You don't need to mention Latin. My Hebrew is on par with my Latin. I see your point, and sometimes there can be something lofty or inspiring about not understanding the singing. But in general, my reaction is that it doesn't work for me.

*Gil: I thought you might say that. In that case, my third suggestion is English.*

Amy: I have a one-word response to the English of the prayer book — ugh!

*Gil: Could you be a little more specific?*

Amy: I suppose "ugh" isn't very eloquent, is it? What I mean is that I find the English of the prayer book formal and dull; it just doesn't talk to me. It sounds like something the Queen of England might say.

*Gil: I'm pretty sure the Queen of England does not get a lot out of a*

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**“Even when I’m trying hard to find meaning in many of the prayers, I’m usually put off by the translations.”**

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*Jewish prayer book either, and to tell you the truth, most of the time, neither do I. I agree with you that the translation can be tough to relate to. Even when I'm trying hard to find meaning in many of the prayers, I'm usually put off by the translations.*

Amy: Well, we agree on that one. So why did you suggest English?

*Gil: Because I suggest using English differently. I didn't get anything out of the English until I stopped looking at the exact literal meaning of the words and started using a little imagination.*

Amy: Imagination?

*Gil: A rabbi once told me that I should not be literal on purpose. He told me that if I want to pick the words apart, I should go to a class on prayer. He felt that a rational "thinking" approach to prayer defeats the purpose. The purpose, he told me, is to get you in touch with your soul, not your brain — to get you into a "prayerful mood," as he put it.*

Amy: I suppose if I were in the right frame of mind, that might work for me. But as a rule, the mentally drifting approaches are just not for me.

*Gil: Okay, then you might like a different approach to the English that I sometimes use — my own personal translation. Again, it involves not taking every word so literally.*

Amy: Like what?

*Gil: Well, to use the blessings as an example, most blessings start with the words: "Blessed are You Lord our God, King of the Universe — Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha olam."*

Amy: Hey, I know those words. They were the only six words I learned to read in Hebrew school. But that's exactly what I mean. This is the kind of language that turns me off.

*Gil: Okay, try this instead. The blessing over eating bread, the famous motzee, is formally translated as: "Blessed are You Lord our God,*

*King of the Universe, who extracts bread from the earth." If you want, you can translate it like this: "I'm in awe of a force greater than me. Dirt becomes flour and we have food. I'm grateful."*

Amy: I'm sorry to be so negative, but that sounds a little too "touchy-feely" for me.

Gil: *You can use any words you want, whatever fits for you: God, awesome, wonder, miracle... The point is, you can translate prayers into whatever language is meaningful to you.*

Amy: In theory, these suggestions are all fine. At a minimum, they are thought-provoking. I just have a difficult time thinking of myself actually doing much of this.

Gil: *You might not. I must say that by myself and at the synagogue, I'm often not moved to pray or by prayer. So I can easily understand why you say this is difficult. Hopefully, what we have talked about can help a little. Minimally, you should be less bored the next time you're at services.*

Amy: I'll accept the possibility that these suggestions could offer me something — except for one thing.

Gil: *Synagogue dues.*

Amy: How did you know?

Gil: *Because I didn't forget you said that at the outset. But I purposely waited until now to mention dues, since you said you were getting little or nothing out of a synagogue membership. I figured, what's the use of talking about the cost if you don't find spirituality or anything else at the synagogue that you perceive has value?*

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**"I really feel repulsed by the emphasis on dollars and fundraising at the synagogue."**

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Amy: That’s kind of weird, because even before this conversation, I did occasionally enjoy or find something worthwhile for me at the synagogue — but not much. I think I could find even more value now if I tried. But I’m not sure it’s worth trying. I really feel repulsed by the emphasis on dollars and fundraising at the synagogue.

*Gil: I only know one answer to that issue: Try to find a place where you find comfort and value. The sad reality of life is that everything is expensive — including offering religious services, running buildings, nursery and religious schools, other programs, and paying salaries.*

Amy: If I was regularly taking advantage of these things, I might feel comfortable paying for them. But I don’t.

*Gil: I suspect a lot of people feel that way. As a rule, I have found that people don’t mind paying high dollars if they feel they’re getting their money’s worth... sometimes even if they don’t get their money’s worth, like some of the clubs people join. As for synagogues, most of the time, most congregants don’t use the many costly services provided — that is, until their baby is born, or it’s time for nursery school or a bar mitzvah, or marriage comes up, or there is a family emergency, sickness, or death — then they expect the rabbi to be on call for them and the facilities to be available. Whether a person uses those things or not, having them on standby and meeting those kinds of demands costs a lot of money.*

Amy: But that doesn’t mean people have a right to demand that I pay a certain amount of money or I cannot participate at the synagogue.

*Gil: You realize, of course, that none of that money ends up in their pockets. The people who have the unpleasant task of managing a synagogue budget are usually volunteers, and their job wins them few friends. Most nonprofits — and synagogues are no exception — are always scrambling to make ends meet. So the volunteers on the budget committee are usually given the responsibility of deciding what a person’s “fair share” should be. Some synagogues just have set rates. But often dues are based on income — those who can least*

*afford to pay are asked to pay less, and vice versa. Either way, the result is often that someone takes offense... especially when that person chooses to hardly ever use the synagogue.*

Amy: That would include me, and while we're on the subject of money, I have to mention another source of discomfort. I am just disgusted by the emphasis on expensive cars, furs, jewelry, designer clothing, and lavish bar mitzvahs that synagogues and temples seem to have. All of this detracts from spirituality for me.

Gil: *This is a major turnoff for me, too. I've found a simple solution. I choose not to keep up with the Joneses — or should I say Cohens. I wouldn't belong to that kind of synagogue.*

Amy: That is easier said than done.

Gil: *Maybe. But it can be done. If issues of dues, materialism, or whatever are a problem for you, then again I'd say to find a place where you do feel comfortable. A big part of the comfort includes a place where you find meaning. One place you might want to explore would be a havurah. They are small groups that get together for a service — often for a meal and socializing too. There are hundreds of them around the country. They even have a national organization you can call that will hook you up with a havurah near you.*

Amy: That sounds interesting — do they charge dues?

Gil: *Some do, some don't. Some include kids, some don't. Some are part of a temple or synagogue, and some are informally organized with no building or rabbi. If the synagogue is not for you, check out an independent havurah.*

Amy: I must confess, you have made some discoveries about synagogue and prayer that are new to me — though you have not erased all of my concerns.

Gil: *Oh, I didn't think I would — especially since I haven't erased all of my own concerns yet, either.*

Amy: I would love to see a synagogue, temple, or rabbi ask me some of the questions you asked me. If they were really interested in the needs of Jews, then they should ask us, listen to us, and be prepared to make changes.

## Key Points to Hold Onto

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### Chapter 4: “There’s No Spirituality for Me in Synagogues and Prayer”

- Finding a rabbi you can relate to could take some searching.
- The service will probably not be meaningful unless:
  1. you feel competent — this is easier to do than you may suspect,
  2. you are in the right frame of mind,
  3. you can relate to the images of God in the prayer book (there are over 100).
- There are a number of ways to look at prayer beyond asking God to intervene:
  1. think in terms of “judging or examining yourself” — that is what the Hebrew word “to pray” means literally,
  2. take a look at Jewish blessings; they are prayers of awe and thanks,
  3. you do not have to be bound to the words of the prayer book to pray.
- If issues of dues, money, and materialism offend you, check out a different synagogue, temple, or *havurah*.

## Afterthoughts

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After reading this book, one person wrote to tell me that for worship to be spiritually uplifting for him, it had to be uniquely personal. He objected to rote reading, and for him, the prescribed format of the Jewish worship detracted from personal spirituality. This may sound strange, but his comment reminded me of a Billy Joel concert I once attended. The concert culminated with Billy Joel's classic hit "Piano Man." He led the entire audience (it felt more like a congregation) in singing the refrain: "Sing us a song, you're the piano man. Sing us a song tonight. Well, we're all in the mood for a melody, and you've got us feelin' alright. La la la..." We sang with gusto and the collective strength of almost 15,000 souls. There was something wonderful about this powerful singing in unison, and yet I think each one of us experienced the joy of the moment in our own uniquely personal way.

I had a similar though less dramatic experience during a sermon I once heard given by an expert in Jewish liturgical music. As part of his sermon, he too led the congregation in the unison singing of a short section of a prayer. When we had finished, he told us that as he listened to us, he heard a collective power in our voices, yet he saw on each face a different expression. His point, I believe, was to show us that worshipping collectively can create a power and spirituality that can touch each person and enhance their individual prayer. While saying this, I can still understand the sentiment of the person who contacted me — especially since he told me that he did not understand Hebrew or the logic behind any of the service.

Some who read this chapter told me that I was too apologetic for rabbis, synagogues, temples, and all that goes on there. Others who read this chapter acknowledged their responsibility for some of the problems they experienced in services. My response to all of these thoughts is that being defensive was certainly not my intention, nor was pointing fingers. I've tried to be fair.

My purpose in this chapter was to air the issues I have heard and to offer some thoughts that might help you find some value in Jewish worship. After all is said and done, I have concluded that when it comes to reaching people spiritually, many things we Jews do are right and much needs to change.

I believe there is great wisdom and value in our spiritual infrastructure — our liturgy, our places of worship, and our religious leadership. At the same time, I also believe that unless all three undergo significant change, more and more Jews will avoid what Judaism has to offer spiritually — and I can’t say I blame them. As I mentioned in the chapter, far too often, I have also felt frustrated and unfulfilled by services.

Specifically, what are some of those changes, and what are we doing right, you may ask? That could probably fill a book by itself. In a few words, in the change department, if it were up to me, I would eliminate as much formality as possible; I would personalize more of the service. I would change prayers to everyday language. I would shorten sermons and the entire service for that matter. I would increase interaction during the service between the pulpit and the congregation. I would get rid of robes. I would use singing and music differently. I would experiment. And I could go on.

On the positive side, to me the idea that Jews do not need an intermediary to be spiritual is important and meaningful. I also like the idea of silent meditation as a part of all services. In addition, I appreciate the participation of children and the relatively lenient attitude about visiting with neighbors that I have experienced in many services. And I could go on.

In this book, however, I won’t. I hope substantive changes will occur soon, but today, even without these changes, I can find benefit through contact with rabbis, prayer, synagogues, and temples. I hope this chapter offered you some ideas that can assist you in finding some benefit as well.

## **Questions From This Chapter You May Wish to Ponder**

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- Have you had a meaningful Jewish spiritual experience?
- How did it happen? Or what was spiritual about it?
- If a rabbi gave you carte blanche to change the synagogue or temple, what changes would you make?