

I learned my synagogue prayers in an Orthodox synagogue in Cleveland, Ohio. In my synagogue even the children of grade-school age knew the prayers - in Hebrew - although we did not know what most of them meant. We also knew the tunes and sang along. Frankly, we could not help but know them. We had been hearing them every week, on Shabbat and holidays, since we had learned to walk.

Why did we go to synagogue so often? Not because we were deeply religious; as children that was not the issue. Rather, our fathers went, and we went with them. (In those days few young mothers went on ordinary Shabbats, and if they did they came quite late.) Also, we went because our friends went, and we wanted to be with them.

I doubt that the idea of a children's service ever crossed the mind of our immigrant and first-generation elders. So, we boys sat on the men's side of the synagogue, some of us with our fathers and some of us with a friend and his father. On the women's side, the girls, who generally had come with their fathers, sat together. I cannot comment more on them since the women's side was another world, and I have no idea what went on over there.

Our synagogue behavior as children, like all other aspects of our behavior, went through a process of development. When we first started going at, say, age three to five, we spent little time inside the shul. We mostly played with each other outside. Occasionally we drifted in, and occasionally our fathers or our lately-come mothers came to check on us. Somehow we always managed to drift back inside toward the end of the service, when the congregation started singing the ending prayers: Ein Keiloheinu, Oleynu, Anim Zemiros and the Yom (not said at TAA), and Adon Olam. After a while, we children could sing them too.

Then came our first rite of passage. No, it was not our Bar Mitzvah; we were only four or five. It was leading the congregation in Adon Olam. Services always ended with a young child leading Adon Olam. Nothing special; that was the way it was. That was our first step to becoming real people. Of course, we were very short people and could not see the Siddur on top of the lectern. So, there was a stool. There was no set age for doing this. Each of us would watch other kids do it. Occasionally the Gabbai would ask if we wanted to do it. Initially our answer

would be a shy "no." It was scary, and we weren't ready. No one pushed us. Then one day, possibly after one of our close friends had done it, we gave a nervous "yes." On went the tallis; up to the Bimah; onto the stool; wait for the signal; sing. "I did it! Hey, that wasn't hard." And so we kept doing it.

Our next rite of passage came at about age six or seven. We would lead Ein Keiloheinu, Olaynu, Anim Zemiros, and the Yom. We had heard these long enough, so we knew the tunes. Again, it was just a matter of courage to say yes. And by now we didn't need the stool. So we eventually did it, and we continued, many times in the succeeding years. Adon Olam was now for the little kids.

By the time our Bar Mitzvahs came around - there were no Bat Mitzvahs -- leading a service was not such a big deal. Sure, we had never led a full Shacharit or Musaf or read the Torah or Haftorah before, so we had reason to be nervous. But, we were not novices, and our Bar Mitzvah teachers had trained us well. So, we led Shacharit or Musaph or read Torah - the whole portion, not the triennial piece - and said the Haftorah. Some of the boys did them all, and gave a speech as well.

Except for a few boys who could not carry a tune, we were usually pretty good at our Bar Mitzvah. So, in our teen years, every once and a while we would be asked to lead Shacharit or Musaph or read Torah again, just like the real people. Some of us really came to like it. (In our synagogue, as is usual in Orthodox synagogues without a cantor, lay people always led the services. The Rabbi never did.)

By now you may have a picture: well-behaved children and teens sitting through the service and following it knowledgeably. Truth be told, that was not the picture at all. Once beyond the mostly-play age, we did sit and pray for Shacharit, but we always went outside for the Torah reading and the sermon. We came back inside for Musaph. No one told us we could not go out, and no one told us when to come back in. We just did it. This practice usually lasted until the middle teens. Then, one day, on no particular schedule, some of us would start staying inside all the time, including the Torah reading and the sermon. The outside group of friends began to dwindle, and soon we were all inside all the time. We had become real people, at least in synagogue terms.

Eventually we formed our own teen Minyan, on our own initiative, run by us teens with no adult supervision or direction. We knew what we were doing.

You may wonder what happened to the girls, for whom there was no participatory role in services. After all, they too knew how to lead Adon Olam and eventually the full service, even though they never got to. I assume that most still belong to Orthodox congregations and are fully satisfied there. Probably a few eventually realized their liturgical potential in egalitarian congregations.

Which brings us to Shabbat Yachad at TAA. Rabbi Barth and our Hebrew School teachers along with the School Committee and others are working to create an atmosphere in which parents and children can come as a family and yet where children can be children. We want the children, and parents who are still learning, to become fully comfortable with our service. I, for one, would love to see TAA's youngest children lead Adon Olam - individually. We have the stool. Then, maybe they will move on to Ein Keiloheinu and Oleinu, and then, as Bnei and Bnot Mitzvah and teens, to Shacharit, Musaph, and Torah reading.

So, please join us. Don't just drop off your children. Come with your children -- as a family -- for Shabbat Yachad. Then, come for a Shabbat non-Yachad as well. And who knows, as we all get more familiar with the prayers and tunes, maybe not only our short people but also more of our tall people will be able to lead services.