

Parshat Emor May 1, 2010

I started researching this d'var torah in the same way I bet 90% of our minyan does. Jane had asked us to focus on the Haftorah for the next few weeks, so I of course started by googling Parshat Emor and the Haftorah for Emor. Now we often joke about "Rabbi Google," but in all seriousness, it was amazing the breadth of resources that were immediately available to me. On just my first page of results, I got original texts in Hebrew and English, plus a variety of commentaries ranging from Rashi to Chabad to even a website called "Homeshuling - A Jewish parenting blog." Each source dealt with Kohanim and the laws that pertain to them in their own unique way.

From more liberal sources there is clearly an intellectual struggle about yearning for the Temple to be rebuilt at all. According to the Rabbis, after the destruction of the Temple, prayer replaced sacrifices. So the question they're dealing with is: does it permanently replace sacrifices or is it a temporary substitute while we are nostalgic about the incense and blood on the altar?

On the other end of the spectrum, on the OU website I read a d'var torah by Rabbi Pinchas Frankel (the educational coordinator at the OU) which confidently summarizes the Haftorah by saying: "In the Haftorah, the Navi teaches some of the laws that will apply to Kohanim, in the time of the Mashiach when, in the Tradition of our People, the Third Beith HaMikdash will stand, never to fall again, in Yerushalayim."

I could have spent time reading literally hundreds of divrei torah and following the thread to multiple sources and opinions on how to look at Parshat Emor. This process kind of illustrates the landscape in which a minyan like ours exists.

This past weekend, Daniel & I attended the Independent Minyan Conference in NYC. This conference was sponsored by Mechon Hadar, which is described as being An Institute for Prayer, Personal Growth and Jewish Study. Basically, Mechon Hadar is the umbrella organization for Yeshivat Hadar which is first full-time egalitarian Yeshiva in North America & something called "the Minyan Project." "The Minyan Project" acts as a *resource for more than 50*

independent minyanim nationwide, which for the most part have sprouted up over the last 10 years.

Some of the things they do include:

Prayer leader empowerment training series.

Halakhic consulting for pressing communal issues (gender, kashrut, etc).

Practical guides for running complicated prayer services.

New melody workshops and resources.

Networking conference for leaders to connect and share best practices.

Internet resources and email lists for cross-minyan communication

This conference brought together independent minyan leaders from across the United States, Canada, Israel, & Europe and gave us the opportunity to delve into many topics. There were about 60 minyanim represented and each seemed to be 2 distinct groups, but most people were around our age (about 10 years out of college.)

The majority were fully egalitarian with a strong emphasis on singing and participation. Some used instruments, some didn't and they all had their own regional flavor. The 2nd group consisted of about 20 partnership minyanim very similar to our setup. There's a mechitza we need at least 10 men for a quorum, and there are certain parts of the service which women can participate in.

We're definitely in the established category along with Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem & Darkhei Noam in New York.

It was interesting to learn about the innovative things going on in each minyan and an eye opening to listen to the struggles that each group has. What is their relationship to halacha, what should the role of a rabbi be?, kashrut, volunteers, etc..

Probably the most important take-away from the conference for us is that we have a lot to celebrate here at Kol Sasson.

-People are **engaged** and feel **empowered** to take on new things & we have a core group of people that attends regularly. **thoughtful** group has actually had conversations about a lot of issue

-People were impressed that we **meet every shabbat morning &**

chagim. Most of these groups meet once a month on a Friday night and struggle to even coordinate that.

- Established location** that works for us and resources like a torah, etc. and many places are meeting out of church basements or small apartments.

- Capable people with knowledge and the **knowledge of that core group has expanded significantly** over the last few years.

- Our **singing is actually pretty good** and most people are engaged in the davening and in learning new melodies.

- kids program - we heard people from other minyanim say “the kids ruined everything” because many of their founders and leaders now have little kids. They are trying to figure out how to handle it now that Friday nights become really hard?

While each minyan was different, I would say that the common thread was a dissatisfaction with the status quo, specifically how people grew up. This isn't a new phenomenon, but what makes the last 10 years different is that the larger movements and synagogues are losing their monopoly.

Monopolies exist because it's hard to enter the market. I talked about the Internet before, because using the tools of the internet, the barriers to entry for creating a Jewish Prayer Community in one form or another have been lowered. One of my sessions talked about the impact of the printing press and the political upheaval that grew out of people becoming literate.

Especially for those of us who have graduated from college in the past 10 years, the Internet has had a similar impact. There is a start-up culture & it's easier to do things for yourself. We don't all see the need to be confined and instructed exactly what to do by large, fairly inflexible institutions in order to create a community to daven with. And the start-up costs to organize have significantly been lowered.

Sitting in our pajamas at 10:00 at night, we can:

- Watch videos of lectures of Talmudic scholars; easily get access to primary sources, and hear the diverse opinions of from across the world.
- Learn new tunes for davening and get training on how to read torah
- Easy to organize people through evite, yahoo groups,
- Ask for volunteers, plan programs, assign service participants,
- Send out newsletters, congratulations, reflections all are now free and easily transmitted to anyone.

You don't have to stand up at the end of davening and give every announcement and thank you when few people are listening anyway, because that can all happen online. You can also be part of a network of like minded people across the world with little costs to organize.

The conversation at shul can now be different. By using online communities effectively like facebook or listserves, we get the mundane things out of the way during the week. You learn what people are reading, their opinions on many topics, look at pictures of their families and get to know them better. Now when you get to shul on Shabbat, the conversation can be deeper and more substantive and you can really focus on the davening.

It's easier to be flexible and grow and change together as a community.

Now all of these things can be done by larger synagogues as well, but they are generally out of touch and feel almost too big and established to change - not that I'm saying it's impossible. Sunday afternoon at our conference was opened to the larger community and there were hundreds of representatives from large Reform and Conservative congregations in the New York area. Listening to their questions, and reactions to the things we were talking about, it was clear that they were treading on unfamiliar ground. Here were people that were either paid professionals or at least had years and years of experiences on synagogue committees and boards trying to learn how to revive their synagogues, whether their davening, educational programs,

or how to reach new people and create community from a bunch of 20 and 30 somethings who not only have been pretty successful at doing these things, but are enjoying the process. You could feel this raw naiveté among these new participants in the conference and the tone of the conversations definitely changed when they were in the room in that it slowed down, because it was like we were speaking a different language. Sometimes they didn't fully understand the things we were talking about and other times they seemed afraid of embracing them.

So one of the pressing questions was what's in store for the future of these independent minyanim? Just like everything else, each group had distinct aspirations. For the sake of this conversation I'll group everyone into 3 categories:

- Partnership minyanim - Many ideally would like to be the place for everything and people wouldn't need to go to other shuls. As most of the Orthodox world moves further to the right, you get the feeling that people in these partnership minyanim want to carve out something that would be part of the future of Modern Orthodoxy.
- Consciously see themselves as not part of anything. - Just want to get together occasionally to daven
- Future of conservative movement/reform - (Get the feeling that Mechon Hadar falls under this category) Conservative Synagogue will look like a hillel and the rabbi will function like a hillel rabbi. Different minyanim - "high conservative", "full literacy & singing" "renewal" etc.

One thing that came up across the board which is worth reminding our kehilla, is that struggling with all of this stuff is a good thing. We're consciously choosing to create something new, outside the confines of the institutions which were created by our parents and grandparents years ago. Struggling with our approach to halacha/kashrut/ role of the rabbi /how to build community/ even with how we should sit and how much we should sing is all L'shem

Shamayim and good things to do.

People in each of these minyanim is compromising in some way in order to make things better. I challenge our community to embrace that dialogue and all the push and pull that goes along with it. If we didn't debate these things & push ourselves outside of our comfort zones, it wouldn't be interesting.

I'd be happy to talk more in-depth about the topics that we covered in the conference with anyone later. I already met with our group of Gabbai's to talk about some of the specifics we covered and Daniel plans to do a d'var torah at a later time covered more of the aesthetic topics that he learned about.

Choreography of a Partnership Minyan

Maximizing Space & Sound

Gabbaing in difficult situations

Kashrut Policies of other Independent Minyans

Cultivating Quality Prayer Leaders

Social Networking for outreach & Using online tools like google documents to create more transparency in the minyan.

Volunteers

Education Programs for our kids - Little kids through high school

I thought it would be fitting to end with an excerpt from another d'var torah I found online - This is **Haftorahman's Lesson of the week From Shma Yisrael.Com:**

In this weeks Haftarah Hashem already tells us what will happen in the future. So it is up to us to get ready. Many times we want something to happen but "it ain't happening yet," that doesn't mean give up, it means get ready. It means "be the first one on line, that when things change and they always do, you'll be the first one in the door. Get yourself spiritually ready. Hashem has already told you what to get ready for. It makes it much easier to plan for the event

Shabbat Shalom (& Shavua Tov)

Sarah Weinberg