

A Classical Reformer Bows to Tradition

By Suzanne Singer

Nine years ago, *Reform Judaism* magazine published the article “My Opinion: Confessions of a Nonconformist Rabbi” in which I stated with pride that, as a person who valued Classical Reform, I did not wear a *tallit* or a *kippah* during services at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, from which I had just been ordained; nor did I bow or stand on my tippy toes during the *Kedusha*, the blessing acknowledging God’s holiness. In response, many of the Reform Jews who feel that the Reform Movement’s new traditionalism has robbed them of their Classical Reform heritage sent me beautiful letters of gratitude. I am sorry to have to disappoint them now.

I still value Classical Reform’s emphasis on universalism and social justice, but my synagogue practice has evolved. As a prayer leader I currently wear a *tallit* and a *kippah*—indeed, I now own nine *tallitot* and countless *kippot*, many of which I’ve collected at b’nai mitzvah services at which I’ve officiated. I bow during prayers. I even get on my tippy toes during the *Kedusha*.

What happened to the woman who once likened bowing and kissing the Torah scroll to idolatry?

The first small shift happened when my Bible professor and good friend Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi commented to me that she bowed to indicate humility. I thought her explanation made a certain amount of sense...but wrote it off as a mere intellectual concession and persist-

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THESE DAYS I WEAR A TALLIT AND KIPAH WHEN READING FROM THE TORAH.

ed in my ways.

A couple of years later, at my first pulpit position, I had the good fortune of serving as assistant to Steve Chester, then senior rabbi of Temple Sinai in Oakland. He and I saw eye-to-eye on many matters, from theology to social justice. And yet, he also bowed. When I noted that bowing seemed incongruous with our shared non-traditional theology, he explained that he needed to move when he prayed; it helped him get into the mood. His movements must have been infectious, because one day during the *Aleinu*, while we stood together side-by-side, I found myself not just bowing before the ark, but bending over so far, my torso was parallel to the floor! I shocked myself: *What was I doing?* I was a little embarrassed. *Had anyone noticed?*

Well, bowing was one thing, but I knew I would never rise up on my toes for the *Kedusha*, pretending that I was reaching toward the heavenly heights of God-praising angels. That is—until not long ago, while chanting “*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh,*” I peered down at my shoes and watched helplessly as they moved up ever so slightly. Stretching my body a tiny bit this first time made it easier to rise more the next time, and more again the time after...until I let go, uniting with the con-

gregation in embodying the prayers, all of us expanding body and soul to join the angelic chorus in acknowledgement of God’s blessings.

I began to understand that my past reluctance to involve my body in prayer had conflicted with my sense of what it means to be a rational person. While I was very comfortable with Torah (text study) and *g’milut chasadim* (social justice)—two of Judaism’s three pillars—the third pillar, *avodah* (worship), set off

an internal emotional alarm system. In my mind, bowing meant that I was losing myself in the worship of God to the point of compromising my ability, as a rational person, to take issue with such notions as praying to *Melech Haolam*—the king of the world! I needed to take a break from arguing with the prayers, from being angry at their constant praise of God when so many things in the world were so wrong. It was time to follow what my friend, Rabbi Amy Sapowitz, wisely counseled: allotting the time of worship for praising God and the time of study for arguing with God.

I had been insisting that the liturgy of the prayer book conform to my rational, literal understanding of the words, rather than opening myself up to appreciate its evocative metaphors and images. For example, I had been deeply offended, even revolted, by the *Unetaneh Tokef*, the Rosh Hashanah prayer asking, “Who shall live and who shall die?” How could God serve as judge, jury, attorney, and witness, leaving us poor human beings with no hope of pleading our cause? And what of those myriad punishments—perishing by fire or by water, by sword or by beast, by hunger or by thirst, by earthquake or by plague—reserved for those whom God deemed guilty? Were tsunami

victims or people starving around the world or cancer sufferers getting their just desserts? Then I came upon interpretive versions of the *Unetaneh Tokef*, such as Stanley Rabinowitz's understanding of fire as ambition and thirst as the need for approval, which gave me a new appreciation of the prayer.

Probing the prayer further, I began to feel its raw power to name a frightening experience—the sense that, at times, a sort of controlling force is wreaking devastation on the lives of people close and far. And, I discovered, the terror engendered by the *Unetaneh Tokef* can serve a similar role to that of the shofar: to awaken us to the harsh realities we face as human beings. As my study partner, Rabbi Eric Rosin, pointed out, it is incumbent upon us to ask ourselves whether and how we are prepared to cope with the potential tragedies in our lives. Are we in the proper frame of mind? Have we accomplished true *teshuvah* (return to the ethical path)—are our relationships with family, friends, God, and ourself where they ought to be? It takes a level of fear and trembling to compel us to change. In the end, perhaps the *Unetaneh Tokef* is the powerful vehicle we need to shake us out of inertia.

I also—finally—grasped that prayer draws upon the non-rational and intuitive parts of our brain. It has the capacity to take us outside of ourselves, to connect us with a greater reality. My mind was always racing, challenging, never wanting to lose control. But to get to that larger place, I needed to quiet my thoughts, be in the moment, let go.

Fortunately, I was accepted by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS) into an 18-month program for rabbis, in which I began to learn how to give my mind a break, be present, and be with what is. At first, my resistance was very strong. During the meditation sessions I'd often fall asleep, and almost every time we sang a *niggun* (a wordless melody), I became irritated by the very idea that it was supposed to transport me to a higher realm. I was thinking of dropping out of the program but, not being a quitter, I stuck with it, surrendering little by little to the opening of my heart. Then one day, to my surprise, I was transported by a *niggun*. It was at the tail end of

our third retreat, after having spent a lot of time meditating, practicing yoga, and eating intentionally, in silence. Now some 30 rabbis and I were sitting in a closing circle. Someone began humming a melody, and all joined in. The melody soared as we connected with one another and with a greater presence, a fuller reality. I was at one with the experience! It felt wonderful! Exhilarated and amazed, I shared this newfound phenomenon with my colleagues, who applauded.

These days I cannot say I am able to achieve this state very often. Having graduated from IJS, I no longer have an intentional community to spend time with meditating, and I have so little time! Plus, for someone like me who still needs to feel in control, becoming exposed before God, as one must do in prayer, remains a struggle. Yet from time to time, a piece of music, a word in the *siddur*, an effort at letting go allows me to stop the tapes running through my head saying that what I'm doing is silly.

My new awareness has helped me become a better worship leader. In guiding my congregants to authentic worship, I recite the prayers with more *kavanah* (intention). I reveal my own doubts and struggles. I speak more about how to prepare oneself for prayer, explaining that a person cannot just walk into a sanctuary and be ready to open his/her heart. We have to settle ourselves, be willing to be vulnerable, to feel deeply, to yearn, and to notice—to notice the blessings of our lives. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "To pray is to take notice of the wonder...."

Judaism is a journey: We are never "there," but continually exploring, wrestling, embracing, then rejecting, then re-embracing core beliefs and behaviors. The Torah ends before we enter the Promised Land, perhaps because there is always one more hill to climb.

As I travel towards my next hill, I keep in mind the words of Great Britain's Chief Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks: "If prayer has worked, we are not the same afterward as we were before." I have had to change in order to pray, and prayer, in turn, has changed me.

I wonder where I will be nine years from now. □