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Prayer Services in Jewish Religious High Schools for Boys in Israel – Students' Perspectives

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Prayer Services in Jewish Religious High Schools for Boys in Israel-Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative research aims to explore the experiences of students in the implementation of prayer services in religious high schools in Israel. Twenty boys aged 16–18 years old from four different schools were interviewed as part of this qualitative research study. Interviews were conducted with these students during 2017–2018.

The research focused on what students felt were the goals of prayer services in schools, and the challenges faced in their implementation. The research points to a whole range of reasons why these services are not maximizing their impact on the religious development of many students. Most interestingly, the research highlights the opinions of students about how these services can be improved to provide a more meaningful experience for them. While this research was conducted within the ethos of Jewish religious schools in Israel, it provides important data about students' views on prayer and their spiritual development which can be of value to other religious denominations as well.

Keywords: prayer, religion, experiences, students

1. Introduction

The following qualitative research focuses on the experiences of twenty students aged 16-18 during prayer services in four Jewish religious high schools for boys in Israel, and the particular challenges that are faced in the provision of this aspect of religious and spiritual education. These high schools are all boarding schools where students live on campus during the week and go home for most weekends. Religious boarding schools for Jewish high school students is quite a common phenomenon in Israel.

In order to understand these challenges, it is important to understand the context in which these schools operate.

2. Jewish Religious High Schools in Israel

The religious educational system in Israel is supervised by an authority within the Israel Ministry of Education called Chemed. The ethos of Chemed is that it is committed to provide an education that is based on the principles of the Torah and Jewish Law and the observance of its commandments. Educating towards belief in God is a cornerstone of Chemed's ethos (Chemed, Ministry of Education, 2016). The provision of prayer services in schools is seen as part of this commitment to Jewish law, as daily prayer is considered a religious duty (Nissel 2001). About 25% of all students in schools in Israel belong to the Chemed system.

In the non-religious state education system in Israel there is no requirement for prayer services and so almost no schools have them. As such, this study is only relevant to the religious Chemed system.

Chemed caters for a wide range of religiously observant populations. Most of these schools are co-educational, offering a dual curriculum comprising of both religious and general studies. A significant number of these schools, however, are single sexed, providing a more intense religious educational program. Generally, parents who are inclined to a more religious lifestyle tend to send their children to single-sex schools, which they believe are more conducive to the religious development of their children. Prayer services in Chemed schools take place in the morning (for about 40 minutes) and in the afternoon (for about 15 minutes). Some also have an evening service (for about 15 minutes) depending on what time the school day finishes.

While the Chemed system is seen as doing a good overall job in providing religious education for its population (Chemed, Ministry of Education, 2016), it faces various tensions in implementing its vision. Firstly, offering a dual curriculum with rigorous religious studies in the morning and general studies in the afternoon, creates a high-pressured learning environment which is stressful for some students. Secondly, by stating that general studies are almost on par with religious studies, at least by the equal time devoted to both, it can give the impression of a duality of vision which could water-down the religious vision of the schools. The discussion on prayer services below, therefore, needs to be considered within the background of these tensions.

As has been noted, this research focuses on a particular population within Chemed – religious dormitory high schools for boys. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, while the religious orientation of Chemed in general can be very widely defined, this single sexed population has a more clearly defined ethos, thus allowing for easier comparison between schools. Secondly, all these schools have services three times a day - again allowing for more accurate comparison between them. Many Chemed schools have

prayers only twice a day, and all Girls' schools only have prayers once a day in the morning. Thirdly, as the study focuses on boarding schools, a comparison can be made between the challenges of students being woken up to prayers each morning and its impact on the implementation of prayer services.

3. Review of Literature-Spirituality and School Prayer

This section will first provide a review of literature in the area of spirituality in general, and children's spirituality in particular, and then relate to research on school prayer with particular reference to Jewish schools. An exploration of the meaning of spirituality and its connection to school prayer is important, because it provides a platform for discussing key questions that are central to this research paper. Firstly, what are the goals and purposes of prayer in Jewish schools in the eyes of the students? Is the prayer service to be conceived merely as a performance of a ritual required by Jewish law, without necessarily requiring forming a spiritual connection to God, or is it an expression or desire for communication with the sacred and the divine - what may be conceived as a "spiritual act"? Secondly, what are the types of challenges these students face in their participation in prayer services at school? An exploration of the literature about the notion of spirituality and its connection to prayer in general, and to school prayer in particular, therefore provides a fundamental background to the study.

4. Spirituality

Scholarly and scientific activity, particularly over the last 50 years, has generated plenty of data about spirituality. The increase in interest, particularly as to the study and meaning of spirituality, has been well documented by researchers. Tacey (2000), for example, sees spirituality as having a relationship with transcendence, while Nye (1996) considers it as part of the inner psychic of life. International and governmental institutions and education departments have stressed the importance of spirituality as an educational goal. They include the report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century, which identified four guiding principles of education - "to know, to do, to live together, to be". The spiritual dimension, with an emphasis on the moral aspects of life, was seen to meet the goals of learning to "live together and learning to be". The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2004) stated that the development of children's spirituality was a right. In this article, each child was said to have a right to a standard of living which was "adequate for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development".

But what does the development of children's spirituality mean? Engebretson, de Souza and Salpietro (2001) used senior primary and middle secondary students in their investigation of the concept of spirituality. Spirituality in the lives of teenagers has also been the focus of research by Duffy (2002). She investigated children's spirituality and gathered data about their ideas, concepts and experiences. She found many examples of the use of prayer as part of the spiritual life of students. McClure (1996) considered spirituality in children to be an innate capacity, likening it to the linguistic capacity. Just as a child is in some way "pre-programmed" to learn the syntax of language, so too the child has an awareness of the spiritual search for meaning, value and purpose. Stewart (1996), such as McClure, considered spirituality as an inner reality. She believed that all children hold some things in life as sacred, that is some things which are held in a special spiritual relationship. She considered that these "sacred" objects act as "icons". They invite children to "wonder, to puzzle, to imagine, to dwell in mystery and ask the big essential questions of life (Stewart, 1996, p. 43). It was through sacred objects that children were given inner strength and confidence to explore new areas of life. In this way the spiritual life of connection to the "sacred objects" was central to the development of the child. Stern has a much wider definition of spirituality as it applies to the school. He defines the "spirit of the school", as "an inclusive community with magnanimous leadership that enables friendship through dialogue in order to create and evaluate valuable or beautiful meanings... and good people" (Stern 2018, p. 193).

5. Prayer and the School

Prayer is a key element in all religions, and it has been shown to be one expression of spirituality. In the Jewish tradition, for example, prayer is "an expression of man's constant awareness of the divine." (Stensaltz, 1996, pp. 179-188). There is in prayer a feeling of connection to the God of history who shows himself through the works of man (Twersky, 2001). For Christians, prayer is connected to the revelation of a God who cares (Foster, 1992), and investigating the concept and meaning of prayer is closely related to the relationship with God.

Turning to prayer in schools, de Souza (2016), who writes from an Australian context, makes a case that communal religious practices such as prayer relate to the deep spiritual nature of human beings. Thus they are critically important for education that fosters full human development. Clearly, according to her view, there is a relationship between spirituality and communal prayer. In the UK, the Education Act of 1988 explicitly requires schools to provide for the physical, moral and spiritual wellbeing of children. This requirement mandates the provision of "collective worship" for a "broadly

Christian character” in all schools. The requirement for ”collective worship” has been understood in different ways. According to Avest (2018), for example, the term refers to attentive observing and listening, or loving and admiring what people have in common. It is not necessarily directed to worship of a higher being. Warner (2000) has a different view. Her interpretation of spiritual development is fundamentally religious and therefore collective worship is an activity that connects the worshipper to God. She writes, “to me, it is a simple offering of the day to God. This may be in the form of a well-prepared assembly [...] or in the form of a quiet time of reflection or prayer before going to lessons [...] however God must be addressed” (Warner, 2000, p.78). The relevancy of this requirement, particularly as has been interpreted by Warner, in a pluralistic society, is being strongly debated, especially over the last number of years. For example, Evans (2015) has written: “the law at it stands is an anachronism: the legacy of a society unrecognizable from the diverse and pluralistic society of today where citizens hold a wide variety of religious beliefs, and increasingly, no religious beliefs”. Others call for greater flexibility, including opportunities for reflection relating to a range of faiths or spiritualities (Richardson & Hunter, 2018). In short the notion and purpose of prayer or communal worship in schools is one which can be understood and interpreted in different ways.

Focusing on the literature relating specifically to adolescent prayer in schools, which is the subject of our research, it has been noted that an individual’s understanding of prayer and the content of his or her prayers shift dramatically across the developmental lifespan (Drelich, 2017). In one study of youth, ages 12–20 years of age, prayer was described as appearing in two development variants: young prayer and mature prayer (Periello & Scarlet, 1991). The motivation of young prayer is the desire to have God change reality to match the wishes of the supplicant, with a focus on what God can do for the individual. Mature prayer, which emerges sometime during adolescence, shifts from a demand directed at God to a conversation with God. Kessler (2007) discusses how adolescents “grapple with the profound questions of meaning and purpose and the desire for a personal relationship with God”. Prayer, then, can serve as a vehicle for exploring the self and a spiritual relationship with God.

6. The Challenges of Prayer Services in the Jewish School

Regarding the practice of prayer specifically in Jewish schools, there is a paucity of research into what is happening in this area. However, over the last few years we do have some indications from researchers about overall trends regarding the experience of prayer in Jewish schools, particularly outside of Israel.

In the primary school, singing is often central to prayer services in these grade levels, which both makes the experience pleasurable for the students (who like to sing) and achieving the goal of familiarity with the words of the liturgy, but without either a cognitive or emotional connection to the meaning behind the words (Wachs, 2009; Golombek, 2011).

In the middle school (11-14 year old students) services are often a challenging educational environment, where the students are no longer as compliant and cooperative as they were in their elementary grades, and where they are asked to engage in an activity lacking meaning for them (during a developmental stage where they are engaged in identity formation and connection making). This often leads to rebellion against the norms of prayer to varying degrees (Golombek, 2011). Rarely are there middle schools that use prayer time for ‘meaning making’ activities, and few middle schools dedicate classroom time to prayer education (Goldberg, 2014; Siegel, 2016). Jacobson-Maisels (2013) argues for the importance of educators who have a deep, conscious, meaningful and developed relationship with prayer, and who have developed a systematic understanding of prayer as a spiritual practice.

In the high school, in general, the more Orthodox the school, the more likely it seems that the prayer experience intends to replicate that of the parental community (Rose, 2017). As such, Orthodox schools tend to provide a prayer service that includes all the liturgy students would say in a synagogue. Prayers are led by a prayer leader, as in the synagogue, and last for a similar time, thirty minutes for the morning prayers and fifteen minutes for the afternoon prayers. Some schools provide creative prayer opportunities, allowing the students the choice to participate in non-conventional services (Wachs, 2012; Goldmintz, 2014). Others will implement a curriculum in the classroom to supplement and enrich the prayer services in the school, but the majority will not invest precious instructional hours on prayer (Goldmintz, 2017; Siegel, 2016).

In Israel, some scholars have focused on the challenges faced by educators in the implementation of prayer worship in schools, and some of the reasons for these challenges. In particular, they note that many students do not willingly take part in these services (Atid, 2002; Rappel, 2003; Simon, 1996). Steinsalz (1996) claims that prayer can only be taught within the perspective of educating for belief in God, and for a prayer service to be successful it must include the opportunity for the student to develop a connection between himself and God. Religious schools, he posits, do a good job in teaching prayer literacy, but do not do enough in developing the spiritual world of students. As such there is a dissonance between the formal act of prayer recitation and the inner spiritual world of the student. Simon (1996), while agreeing that more focus should be spent in developing the students’ personal connection to God, suggests there is another area

that needs to be addressed. Students don't appreciate the beauty of the prayers because they have never been taught the deep messages behind the prayers. They are mumbled rather than internalized. Students should learn about when the prayer was written, its structure and historical background as to why it was written. Rudik (2003), suggests that the difficulties students have with school prayer are connected to the demands of the school curriculum. Thirty non-examinable prayer minutes within a crowded, rigorous, test-orientated school day is not conducive to a serious and meaningful prayer experience. Adler (2003) posits that in societal norms and values in which the material is the center of man's desires and needs, the development of man's spiritual world takes second place, if at all. This attitude has a negative effect on the efficacy of school prayer.

However most of the above data is anecdotal rather than research based. There is little qualitative or quantitative data about the state of prayer in Jewish schools worldwide in general, and in the Israeli school system in particular. In addition to this, little attempt has been made to question students themselves about their experience of school prayer and how it can be made a more meaningful experience for them. One recent study by Sudus (2015) researches religious girls' attitudes to school prayer, but only from the perspective of their teachers. The girls themselves were not interviewed. Another by Drelich (2017) explored the long term impact of a seventh grade prayer program in New York. He emphasizes the place of the teachers in the school prayer services. He notes the plethora of negative comments students expressed about teachers whose primary focus was keeping students quiet, which caused cynicism and rejection by the students.

This paper intends to chart new waters in this topic, researching the experiences of 16–18 year old boys in religious high schools in Israel regarding their attitudes to prayer. This is a first attempt at providing more systematic research data for high school students in Israel.

7. Methodology

The methodology used in this study followed a qualitative research model. This type of research tries to capture what participants experience on the topic in their own words (Shkedi, 2003). Twenty students between the ages of sixteen and eighteen were interviewed, using semi-structured questions prepared in advance utilizing the model suggested by Patton (2003).

Students interviewed were chosen using two types of purposeful sampling (Patton 2015). The first was a typical purposeful sampling strategy which reflected the average person, situation or instance of the phenomenon of interest (Meriam 2016). The second

method utilized was a snowball, chain or network sampling, a strategy involving locating a few key participants who met the above criteria of typical purposeful sampling for participating in the study, who then referred the interviewer to other participants. Students named other students who exemplify the characteristics of interest in the study.

All interviews were recorded by tape and then transcribed. In order to maximize the validity of the research, observations were conducted during prayer services. In addition, the strategy of member checks was used to ensure internal validity of the data. Respondents validated the interview data by providing feedback on the emerging findings (Merriam 2016).

Regarding the number of respondents (20), once twenty students had been interviewed from the various schools, the emerging findings felt saturated (Merriam 2016) in that the same phenomena began to repeat themselves and little new information surfaced. This adds to the validity of the research.

The interview data was analyzed using a method of categorization (Alpert 2007) which identified the core recurring topics in one interview and then extrapolated and compared them to other interviews.

Three research questions formed the basis of student interviews:

1. What are the goals and purposes of school prayer in the eyes of these students?
2. What are the challenges they experience during the course of school prayer?
3. What strategies would they suggest to address them?

8. Findings

Students were first asked to describe the religious environment in their schools and the place of prayer within the school day. While these boys study in different religious high schools throughout Israel, they had similar descriptions of their experiences. In the words of one student which was largely typical:

“Prayer is a central component of the school day. We pray three times a day: morning, afternoon and evening. Most of our morning timetable is focused on religious studies and we study Mathematics, English, Sciences, etc. in the afternoons. The religious environment pervades the school, so prayer is an important component of that environment”.

9. Goals of School Prayer

The students, however, had different views about what they saw as the goals of school prayer. In the words of one:

“Prayer is something we do as part of the timetable of a religious school. That is part of the daily routine. We have classes in which we learn about Judaism so this is part of that”.

This student sees prayer in school as one segment of the school day. Something you “do” similar to the religious classes you attend. Daily prayer is an important Jewish religious requirement that has to be performed within a religious school, but has no “spiritual” meaning beyond this.

However, other students describe the prayers in school as the opportunity for a spiritual experience in which they strive to connect to God. Rarely do they feel such an experience, but they strive towards it. In the words of one:

“In most prayer services I don’t feel close to God - I feel it was hardly worth it - but occasionally it does it for me - and that is awesome.”

Another student offers a different insight into the goal of prayer. He addressed that it helps him in developing his relationship to God.

“Prayer offers me the greatest opportunity to connect to God. We don’t have any more miracles as we had in Biblical times. Then we saw God in all his power. Today prayer is the only way we can connect to Him.”

Another student offers a different perspective to the place of prayer in his school day:

“I know when I get up in the morning, I have to “break” my sleep cycle in order to pray - so too during the day I have to “break” my free time to make room for God. That makes prayers so important.”

However there is another group, a smaller voice in number that sees no value in the prayer service at all. In the words of one:

“I go to a religious school because my parents want me to. It is a good school academically, so I suffer prayers but not more than that. I really don’t believe in God. I go through the motions.”

For this student, the goal of school prayer is formalistic at best. It is an activity which is part of the school timetable - nothing more.

10. Challenges Regarding School Prayer

Students were asked about specific challenges that they had with school prayer. Some are challenged by a number of technical issues connected to prayer services at school. For example, one difficulty mentioned by students is the fact that prayers are said early in the morning when many have just woken up and are barely awake. In the words of one:

“At 7am in the morning we are half asleep. How do you expect us to take prayers seriously? Why don't we pray later in the day? Many of my friends fall asleep during prayers”.

Many students discussed another challenge they had with prayers - their difficulty in understanding the meaning of the prayers and their relevancy to their lives. Even those who were striving for a spiritual experience in prayer found it difficult to understand all the words of the Hebrew prayer (and these are Hebrew speakers). The prayers, some two thousand years old, are written in classical Hebrew and are very distant from an adolescent living in the 21st century. In the words of one student:

“I don't even understand what I am saying sometimes, so how can the prayers be meaningful to me? I wish I could change the words in some of the prayers...”

Another student expressed similar thoughts:

“I feel sometimes I am kidding myself... I come to service because I have to, mumble words that I don't always comprehend... what is the point?”

It is not only the words that students find difficult to understand, but also the relevancy of some of the prayers which do not necessarily speak to the modern-day student. For example, one student said:

“How are the prayers requesting a return to the temple service relevant to me? The temple does not mean anything to me today - we have not had one for thousands of years.”

For others, the repetitive nature of the prayers makes it difficult to transform the service to a meaningful experience.

“We say the same standing prayer three times a day, morning, afternoon and evening. At some point you say to yourself, I have already said this twice today. It is more like a boring ceremony than a meaningful service. I say to myself: let's just get over it...”

While there is place for personal prayer in the Jewish liturgy, these opportunities are far and few between. In the words of one student:

“There is only a small part of the service that one can add personal requests. Most of the time I am listening to the prayer leader and quite passive - there are few opportunities in the daily service to sing”.

A particularly thoughtful student mentioned an interesting theological issue he had with prayers. In his words:

“I really have difficulty praying to God. To whom am I actually praying? Who is this invisible being I am talking to? Other religions have various visual images to pray to or guide you in your prayers... but we have nothing... it is really difficult to pray in the Jewish religion! I am saying words I don't connect with, to a Being I don't connect to.”

In order to strengthen the validity of the data gleaned from the interviews, prayer services were observed in the various schools. Many of the issues mentioned in the discussions were validated. A good number of students look very tired in the morning prayers, with some leaning their face on their hands and on the table; others are saying the prayers, some clearly with devotion. The majority sit respectfully but do not participate actively in the service.

11. Addressing the Challenges of School Prayer

After discussing the challenges they face in school prayer, students were then asked to share ideas about how these issues could be addressed. They suggested some interesting ideas. In the words of one student:

“We need to change the language of prayer to make it less archaic and closer to our lives. Even if we can't change everything, and I would not want to change everything, I am a traditional Jew, but still let's include some modern-worded prayers, take a few of the older-worded prayers that none of us really understand out of the liturgy”.

Other students offered similar thoughts, but felt that this was not a very practical suggestion. In the words of one:

“We'd love to change the words of some of the prayers to make them more accessible, but who are we to do that? The Rabbis have set the formula for prayer, it is not our role nor within our power to change that”.

Two students had a practical suggestion to help them understand the words they are saying in prayer:

“We study lots of Bible and Talmud in school but we have no lessons on prayer. We are meant to understand them by osmosis. Yes, we had some basic explanation in grades 2 and 3, but now we are older, we need more deep explanations that we need to learn in class before we pray. That would make a big difference”.

This suggestion was then shared with all the interviewees from all four schools. They all said this was a valuable suggestion which should be adopted by all their schools.

A number of students made another suggestion - to shorten the length of the prayers. As one said:

“It really is hard to concentrate for 40 minutes every morning. How about shortening the prayers - do we have to say them all?”.

Another issue is the fact that the Amidah (standing prayer) is said three times a day with the same words in the liturgy. As one exclaimed:

“that is so tedious and boring - let us say that prayer is just once a day. . . that would make prayers less bothersome” .

But again, students posited that this suggestion was not practical. In their view, this was something for the Rabbis to do not them. One other suggestion to make prayer less tedious is to introduce singing at various places in the text. As one said:

“If we sang at various parts, that would change the face of prayers in school - it would be something we do together”.

One student had an interesting idea about how the monotony of repeating the same liturgy can be at least partially addressed. In his words:

“I remember the time we prayed together on the top of a mountain during a school trip. It was amazing. We all got up early to see the sunrise, climbed together to the top of the mountain and prayed - I felt close to God, perhaps the first time in my life. I wish we could do these trips more often. I know I can't pray like that in school every day, but a few times a year in a different environment would be great”.

In summary, students raised a variety of challenges they have with school prayer. Some are connected to technical issues like the early start of prayers. A few focused on spiritual challenges; praying to a being they have never seen and who they are not sure if he exists at all. However, the most repeated concern was their lack of understanding of the

meaning of some of the prayers and their relevancy to their lives. This is compounded by the fact that the same prayers are repeated three times daily, making the act of prayer monotonous and boring. There is little opportunity for them to engage in personal prayer.

The students also offered some interesting suggestions for dealing with these challenges, including: fixing a time in the schedule to learn about the prayers, changing the prayer setting from time to time and introducing singing and music to make the prayer service more lively.

12. The Role of the Teacher in School Prayer

Most of the students felt that the role of the teacher in school prayer is problematic. He often becomes a disciplinarian figure rather than a religious role model. Often punishments are given to students who are not participating in the prayers or not coming to the prayers on time. In the words of one:

“The biggest problem we have with school prayers is the attitude of the teachers towards us. In our school, a student who does not come to school prayers three times in the term is punished”.

All the students shared anecdotes on this issue, which either happened to them or their friends. In the words of one:

“In a classic case, which happens often, the teacher will punish a late comer to prayers by saying “Tomorrow come 15 minutes earlier.”. And if this does not help, he will say the next day “Come 30 minutes earlier.”. But the teachers don’t ever deal with the source of the issue. The teacher does not ask, “Why don’t you come earlier? What is your difficulty?”

Another student describes a similar situation but in starker terms.

“I don’t feel that the teachers really care about this issue in my school. There was recently a twelfth grader who was suspended from school because he regularly came late to prayer services. He wrote a letter to his teacher saying; why is it that you have never asked me why you do not get up, you never tried to improve the situation”.

However, in one of the other schools, students have noted a change of attitude in recent times. In the words of one:

“I can see that the teachers are recently trying to make an effort not to force us to pray. They can see it is counter-productive. The policy now is that students have to come to prayers but are not required to pray. You have an obligation to be there - just like in any class, but not more than that. I think it is so much better”.

This non-coercive attitude towards prayer seems to be having a positive impact on students.

In the same school, teachers have begun a voluntary “prayer club” in which students come to an open discussion about prayer and its meaning. In the words of one:

“For the first time regarding prayers I feel I am being listened too, my teacher is trying to understand where I am coming from, what questions I have both in understanding the text and about God and most importantly he is not forcing me to do anything... that for me means everything...”

13. Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative research investigated the experiences of twenty high school boys in four religious high schools in Israel regarding their attitude towards school prayer. Particularly, it focused on what they thought were the goals of school prayer; what challenges they had in school prayer and how they thought they could be addressed.

14. Goals and Challenges of School Prayer

Regarding the goals of school prayer, there was a range of responses. There were those who felt that it was no more than a religious Jewish requirement; others who felt that it was part of the school day timetable in a religious school, while others, a smaller number, saw it as an opportunity to come close to God.

Looking at the challenges faced by students, some are technical like the early start of prayers. Others would appreciate greater understanding of the history and structure of the prayers. Theological issues such as belief in God and the effectiveness of prayer in changing one’s fate, are also challenges faced by these teenagers.

The literature seems to support these findings regarding the challenges of students in school prayer, as expressed in their interviews. In particular, the debate between Steinsalz (1996) and Simon (1996) is relevant here. According to Steinsalz, the root of the issue is that schools do not do enough in developing the inner spiritual world of the student. For school prayer to be successful it must include the opportunity for the student to develop a personal connection to God. Drelich (2017), in his research of high school prayer in a Jewish school in New York, shares similar views in that he found that students wish to create their own relationships with God. They value those prayer groups that allow time for students to enter their own “spiritual time” and come close to God.

For Simon, the core issue is different. According to Simon, what is needed are lessons to teach students about the history, and structure of the prayers.

The findings of this research, however, indicate that the Simon/Steinsalz and Drelich discussion is only partially relevant to the challenges faced by high school students in relation to school prayer. While spiritual aspects involving the connection with God are related to the findings, as is to a lesser extent the history and structure of the prayers, it is the difficulty in understanding the meaning of the prayers and their relevance to students' lives which appears to be the most predominant challenge shared by these students. As has been shown, the fact that many of the prayers are written in ancient Hebrew makes it difficult for students to understand or identify with the messages of the prayer. Beyond the language, the content of some of the prayers does not necessarily speak to the 21st century student. For example, prayers requesting a return to the Temple service are not deemed relevant to many of these students. The monotony and repetition of the same daily prayers adds to the sense of distance from the prayer service.

This research finding seems to indicate that neither Simon, Steinsalz nor Drelich have fully appreciated a core challenge students face in their prayer services. Some students indeed wish to develop a greater spiritual connection with God, and others have theological issues of belief. Some would also value more understanding of the history and structure of the prayers. But it is the meaning of the words and relevance of the prayers to student's lives that appears to be of most concern.

From the interviews, it seems that the role of teachers in school prayer is a critical factor in the successful implementation of the prayer service - a more disciplinary approach does not seem to have a positive attitude towards this activity. This finding is supported by the literature. Drelich (2017), points to the negative impact of teachers' authoritarian practices that emphasize compliance and/or coercion rather than spirituality or relationship. He notes the plethora of negative comments students expressed about teachers whose primary focus was on keeping students quiet, or taking attendance. The former causing cynicism and the latter creating resentment, particularly with students who have difficulty in waking up in the morning.

However, there is another aspect of the student-teacher relationship which is addressed by Drelich and to a lesser extent by students in their interviews in this research. Drelich identifies the positive influence on students' prayers when teachers use a relationship-based approach, taking a personal interest in students' lives, or demonstrating respect for the students' own strivings toward an authentic relationship with God.

Drelich's comments seem to concur with the the various suggestions made by students to address the above challenges. From the interviews it seems that a more col-

laborative approach in which teachers listen to students concerns and allow them more space to decide if they want to pray or not, would seem to be a good way to create a more positive attitude to this activity. This could also include discussions on faith and belief which presently, in all schools, have no forum for discourse. In addition, more opportunities in the school timetable to learn about the meaning of the prayers would also be helpful. It would also seem that greater flexibility about when prayers are said in the school day and for how long would be useful.

In conclusion, it is hoped that this study of students' experiences will be helpful not only to leaders of Jewish religious schools in Israel, but also for all denominations interested in making prayer services a more positive and meaningful experience for their students. The major finding of this research is that students seem most concerned about finding relevance and meaning through understanding the words and messages of the prayers themselves, and has implications not only for Jewish schools, but for schools of different faiths around the world.

This research seems to indicate that the major question that high school students are grappling with in prayer is: what does this prayer mean and what does it mean to me? Making prayer services in schools more meaningful and relevant to students' lives would seem to be of importance to educators whether they be in Jewish Schools in Israel, Muslim schools in Turkey, or Catholic schools in Malta. How that can best be done is an open challenge for all those involved in the planning and implementation of school prayer services in schools throughout the world.

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